

Investigating Sexual Assault Against People with Disabilities: Techniques for Effective Communication

In this installment, we describe techniques to effectively communicate with a victim who has any disability that may impact his or her ability to understand you, or your ability to understand the victim.



Source: OVC, *Victims with Disabilities: Collaborative, Multidisciplinary First Responders*

Start with the Assumption You Can Communicate

First, you should start from the assumption that you can have a normal conversation with the victim. Unless the victim has a severe cognitive or communication disability, you should be able to communicate effectively, even if it takes a while to become accustomed to the victim's "speech patterns, inflections, and accent" (Office for Victims of Crime, 2011, p. 21).

You should also allow sufficient time for this natural process, but monitor the length of the interview, because this can become burdensome for victims (Office for Victims of Crime, 2011). Also try to "focus on what the person is saying, rather than how she/he is saying it" and "do not try to finish the individual's sentences or thoughts (SafePlace, 2007).

If You Cannot Understand the Victim

If you find that you cannot understand the victim, no matter how hard you try, do not pretend that you do. Seek clarification using the strategies offered by SafePlace (2007):

Wait: Listen to the whole sentence or phrase. Wait for a second and try to relax. Let the conversational context help you.



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Repeat: Simply repeating the sentence or thought may be enough. There are times, though, when repeating will not help because the speaker is not going to be able to change the way a specific word is pronounced. If repeating does not work, move on to another strategy.

Rephrase: Ask the individual to try and express the same thought using various words. Often, the misunderstanding hinges on one or two words in a sentence.

Identify which part of the sentence or thought was misunderstood. If you know most of the phrase and can identify which part(s) are unclear, you might try repeating what you know, and ask him/her to focus on finding a way to communicate just the part you did not get.

Spelling: Once you have located the word you do not understand, ask the individual to spell it for you. It usually just takes the first few letters of the word to clear up the confusion.

Writing: You can ask the person to write it down, or you can write down what you heard.

Getting help: if nothing else is working, you may want to ask the person if there is someone who might assist in communications (SafePlace, 2007, pp. 63-64).

If you do have someone assist with communications, however:

Carefully consider whether this other party is safe, or will have opinions that influence her/his interpretations. Do not allow this person to add to or critique the crime victim's comments, or comment about the crime itself. The crime victim must know that you believe her/his own statements (SafePlace, 2007, p. 64).

When to Switch Interviewers

When none of these strategies work, then it may be time to switch interviewers. Guidance for this difficult situation is offered by the Office for Victims of Crime (2008):

You may need to call in someone as an interpreter who

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knows the individual and is not invested in any way in the outcome of the interview, such as a teacher or speech therapist. If this is necessary, the interpreter must be briefed on what is expected of him or her during and after the interview. The interpreter may require debriefing following the interview, both for the person's psychological well-being and for issues of confidentiality that may concern the victim. In the best circumstances, the new interviewer would have been observing the interview (Office for Victims of Crime, 2011, pp. 21-22).

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