

# Communicating with Consumers with Speech Impediments

Speech is an important part of our daily lives and interactions. When a consumer has trouble speaking clearly, it presents barriers to effective communication and can make it difficult to perform your duties as a provider. It might feel uncomfortable for you to communicate with a consumer who is hard to understand. There are simple actions you can take to help a consumer with a speech impediment feel comfortable and communicate most effectively.

- **Remember, it may be only the speech that's impaired**
  - Many people have trouble speaking without any other disabilities or difficulties. Do not assume that you must speak slowly or use simple language around someone with a speech impediment. The consumer might hear and understand you but have trouble speaking or responding. Speak clearly and distinctly but naturally, and be aware that the consumer might feel like you are “talking down” to him/her if you speak too slowly. It might be useful to use ‘yes or no’ questions depending on the severity of the speech impediment.
- **Do not be afraid to ask the consumer to repeat him/herself**
  - People who stutter or fumble with words or do not speak clearly usually know that they can be difficult to understand. Everyone wants to be heard and understood, so if you did not catch what a consumer with a speech impediment said, let them know so they can make their point. You can also repeat back to the consumer what you have understood to make sure it is correct.
- **Be careful about other corrections**
  - It may be tempting to tell your consumer to “slow down” or “take a deep breath” but these suggestions may not help the situation and might actually make communication more difficult. Corrections of this kind might make the consumer nervous which could cause the speech impediment to worsen. In addition, finishing your consumer’s sentences can be frustrating and cause the consumer to feel rushed.

- **Use other clues**
  - Speech is not the only form of communication. Watch the consumer's face, reaction, and body language (including facial or hand responses), as these may help you in understanding. Be an active listener: look for hints from eye gaze and gestures and then take a guess (e.g. "Are you talking about the TV news? Yes? Tell me more. I didn't see it.").
- **Be patient**
  - Be willing to work at communicating. In some cases, this may mean learning basic sign language or being aware of special communication devices for consumers who are nonverbal. If appropriate, become familiar with devices, systems, and programs which have been developed to assist. Do not be afraid to ask the consumer if there are ways to improve communication with him/her or ask the consumer's family or friends any tips they have learned.

Speech impediments can add difficulty in communicating with your consumer but need not prevent a normal and fulfilling communicative process or interfere with your work as a provider.