

# LET'S YARN

Working with First Nations People with Intellectual Disability  
12 Inclusive Communication Tips





**Hi, I am Justen.**

I like advocating for people's rights, nature and travelling.

I have lived experience with an intellectual disability and I am a First Nations person.



**CID first published these Communication Tips with Ella and Alex in 2020.**

.....

In 2022 I added cultural comments to these tips. Some people with intellectual disability, community members and health workers who identify as Aboriginal have added comments as well.

Intellectual disability is a reduced ability to process information and to learn new skills. The disability we have is only one part of us. Our life experience, emotional intelligence, education, family, support and personality all contribute to who we are and what is important to us.

These tips are meant as a guide, everyone is unique. We're the best people to tell you about how we need you to communicate with us. Just ask, we will appreciate it.

Taking the time to ensure communication is accessible and culturally sensitive means we are all included. It means we can understand what is happening and feel respected, comfortable and heard.

We hope you find our tips helpful and that you get the opportunity to use them to make our communities more inclusive of First Nations people with intellectual disability.

Thanks,  
Justen and the CID health team.

## Support people with intellectual disability to feel comfortable and welcome.

- 
- Your body language is important. How you hold yourself can affect how comfortable the person you are working with feels.
  - Some First Nations people and people with disability will not look directly at you. Check in with the person's preferences about eye contact and cultural considerations.
  - Be mindful that health systems can be places that hold a lot of trauma. Use trauma-informed practice, a philosophy that is committed to avoiding traumatisation, preventing re-traumatisation and promoting healing. Trauma-informed principles involve safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment.
  - It is important to begin inclusive communication with safety in body language and actions.
  - Also consider that sometimes when yarning about health, a woman with a woman could be more comfortable. It's women's business. Also a man with a man could be more comfortable. It's men's business.

### GOOD EXAMPLE

Be personable. Where possible share an offering, like biscuits. This can be especially meaningful if the person has a fear of discrimination when presenting to the hospital or clinic.

A tip is to try offering the person a cup of water. Then you can encourage them to look at the water, drink the water and taste the water. It gives them something tangible and involves a lot of their senses.

Water keeps us healthy. Water calms our thoughts, so we can communicate what has happened to our health. You can explain the calming impact of water, and the cultural significance of water as the blood of the land, The Dreaming, and where food and resources are from. Water is an essential cleansing and healing practice in Aboriginal culture.

Pouring a cup of water as a welcome gesture does not take too much time.

## 2

### Make an effort to understand people with an intellectual disability.

---

- Connect with the person before talking about serious topics or business. Finding common ground is important to feeling comfortable, safe and equal. Be friendly. Connection is important over time, because trust is built over time.
- Respect the time when people are upholding culturally meaningful responsibilities like elders and leaders' responsibilities and sorry business responsibilities.
- Even when time is limited, it is important to take time to listen. An introduction meeting can help to get to know the person. Ideally, organise a pre-appointment meeting when the person is not sick to know their personality and behaviour when they are feeling good. It is important for you to have an understanding of the person's disability and their needs.

### GOOD EXAMPLE

- If you are asking people with intellectual disability a question, look at the person and listen when the person responds.
- You can use the CID **My Health Cards** as a communication tool. You could use a Connection Starter card like "What are some things you like to do?"



# 3

## Talk to people with an intellectual disability clearly.

---

- Please do not use jargon or acronyms. Explain things in everyday language so that everyone can understand.
- Speak calmly and clearly. Work at the pace of the person and work within the person's comfort levels. A pace that is sustainable for the person is a better way to support participation in healthcare.
- Some First Nations people with intellectual disability may find forms and other written communication a barrier to accessing health care. You can give the person written information that says the important points.

### GOOD EXAMPLE

Acknowledge that First Nations communities have a strong history of storytelling. It is important to have most of the communication by having a yarn. Where possible use visual and verbal narratives to share information with each other.

# 4

## Check in with people with intellectual disability often.

---

Make sure the person understands what you are saying. Challenge your assumptions about what someone can understand. It can be hard or embarrassing for the person to stop you to say "I don't understand." It can be easier for the person to understand when you use direct and literal language.

### GOOD EXAMPLE

During a conversation, regularly check to see if the person is following. A good way to find out if the person understands is to use the teach-back method. The teach-back method is when a health worker provides information and then asks the person to teach the same information back to them, using their own words.

You could say "Can you tell me what we have chatted about in your own words?" or "How would you explain this to your family?" Explore the teach-back method in more detail in our [CID E-learning for Health Professionals](#).

# 5

## Ask open questions.

---

- Open questions can give people with intellectual disability the chance to tell you more. Be mindful that the prevalence of trauma in the disability community means a lot of people will feel uncomfortable saying no.
- If you ask a yes or no question, the person will most likely choose the answer they think you want to hear.
- Closed questions can be valuable when you need a quick, definitive answer but open-ended questions are best when exploring information with the person.

### GOOD EXAMPLE

- Before you ask about the person's health concerns ask "Tell me about you?" and "Do you identify as a First Nation's person? If so would you like to have a yarn with an Aboriginal Health Worker or Aboriginal Liaison Officer?"
- You can use the [CID Easy Read Aboriginal Health Worker Guide](#). This guide can support First Nations people with intellectual disability to understand what support is available.
- Then you can ask "What do you think about your health?" or "Tell me about what happened?" or "How can I support you?"

# 6

## One topic at a time.

---

Finish one topic of conversation before you start another. Make it clear you are moving on to another topic. People with intellectual disability need breaks in between conversations.

### GOOD EXAMPLE

When you finish speaking about one health plan step, use the teach-back method explained in tip number 4. Take a pause, then once you have checked the persons understanding, you can move on to the next health plan step.

# 7

## Always check if people with an intellectual disability want a supporter.

---

- People with intellectual disability have the right to choose who comes into their appointments or meetings. A supporter might be a paid support worker, someone in kinship, extended family, mob, friend or other support person.
- Give people time to make decisions. People with intellectual disability may need time to go away and talk with their trusted supporters and to review any information before making a decision.

### GOOD EXAMPLE

- Welcome the person with intellectual disability then ask who will join the conversation. Even when the person has a supporter, continue to talk directly to the person with intellectual disability so they don't feel invisible.
- If the person doesn't communicate verbally, always acknowledge them first. Ask them for permission to ask for additional information from the person supporting them.



# 8

## Take extra care and patience over the phone.

People with intellectual disability may find it hard to talk over the phone unless they know the person on the other end. Over the phone you can't read people's facial expressions or body language. Tell the person most of the information you want them to know face to face.

### GOOD EXAMPLE

- People with intellectual disability may get worried about scam calls and private numbers. You can warn the person that you're going to call at a certain time and date.
- A text before the call works well to tell the person who you are.
- Make sure you give extra time for the person to take in the information and understand what you are saying over the phone.
- Ask if the phone call is working for the person. If it isn't then work out another method of contact.





# 9

## Repeat new information.

---

Remembering and processing new information takes time. Repeating helps the person remember.

### GOOD EXAMPLE

It can be helpful to explain a referral a few times, to ensure the person with intellectual disability understands what to expect, especially when being referred to a new health professional, new environment and new type of health care service.

# 10

## Have pictures and visuals ready.

---

- Pictures can help explain hard words and reinforce what you are saying. Use pictures or other visuals to help explain difficult concepts such as mental health.
- You can use the My Health Matters visuals. One of the visuals is a feelings map. You can ask the person to point to the feelings they've had that day.

### GOOD EXAMPLE

Where possible to be inclusive and meaningfully welcoming you can represent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture in visuals you use. You can show Aboriginal artwork on visuals, resources, in hospitals and clinics. It can make the person feel comfortable and welcome.



## Ask people with an intellectual disability what is needed with respect.

---

Don't be worried about asking the person questions about how the person communicates. The person will appreciate it. Place the person at the centre of the care. The person is the expert in their own life and have already overcome barriers to be present with you.

### GOOD EXAMPLE

Resources like the **CID My Health Matters Folder**, **CID Health Guides** and **CID My Health Cards** can assist people with disability prepare for health appointments and communicate what is needed.

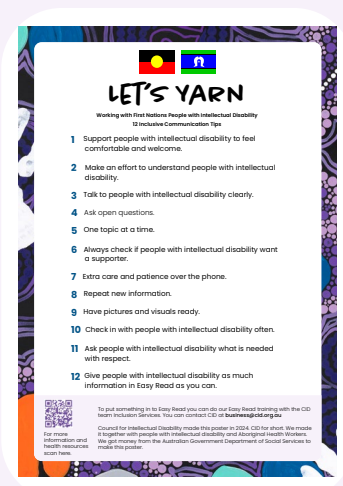


## Give people with intellectual disability as much information in Easy Read as you can.

Accessible communication is a human right. Easy Read is information that is easy for people with intellectual disability to read and understand. Easy Read is a form of direct communication that uses everyday language with pictures to explain meaning. You can use Easy Read as a conversation tool with a person with intellectual disability. Easy Read is one way of communicating inclusively with everyone.

### GOOD EXAMPLE

To put something in to Easy Read you can do our Easy Read training with the CID team Inclusion Services. You can contact CID at [business@cid.org.au](mailto:business@cid.org.au)



There is a poster to remind you of these 12 inclusive communication tips.

You can find the Let's Yarn Poster here:  
[www.cid.org.au/resource/lets-yarn-poster](http://www.cid.org.au/resource/lets-yarn-poster)



Meleisa Cox made the art on this guide.

The artwork is about **Yindyamarra**.

**Yindyamarra** is a Wiradjuri word that means respect.

It shows our connection to everyone who supports us.



## Contact CID



1800 424 065



[info@cid.org.au](mailto:info@cid.org.au)



[www.cid.org.au](http://www.cid.org.au)



[facebook.com/NSWCID](https://facebook.com/NSWCID)



[twitter.com/CIDvoice](https://twitter.com/CIDvoice)



[instagram.com/council\\_intellectualdisability](https://instagram.com/council_intellectualdisability)

Council for Intellectual Disability made this document Easy Read.  
CID for short. You need to ask CID if you want to use any pictures in  
this document. You can contact CID at [health@cid.org.au](mailto:health@cid.org.au)

This information guide was written in 2024.

We got money from the Australian Government Department of Social  
Services to make this guide.