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**An Introduction to**

**Intensive Interaction**

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**An introductory guide to Intensive Interaction for people working with or caring for people with severe or profound and multiple learning disabilities and/or autism**

**(2020)**

**What is Intensive Interaction?**

Intensive Interaction is a responsive social communication approach that is most often used with people who have severe or profound learning difficulties and/or autism. However, the approach is now also being used successfully with other people who find social engagement difficult e.g. people with late stage dementia.

Intensive Interaction is both highly social and mainly responsive in nature, rather than being directive, or goal or target orientated. The approach focuses on using the ‘**Fundamentals of Communication**’1 as a means of establishing and developing improved social communication exchanges.

These Fundamentals of Communication are the communication skills and understandings that, in developmental terms, normally precede symbolic speech development; however, Intensive Interaction is now also being used with people who already have some level of speech comprehension but have a social impairment e.g. due to their autism.

These **Fundamentals of Communication** are the social communication capabilities of:

* developing the ability to attend to another person
* learning to share personal space
* using and understanding eye contacts and facial expressions
* using and understanding sociable physical contacts
* using vocalisations with meaning; for some, using some level of symbolic language
* taking turns in exchanges of behaviour, and/or in some way sequencing a series of social exchanges with another person
* enjoying being with another person

The techniques of Intensive Interaction (see page 4) were originally developed from research into how young infants naturally develop the complex, interrelated skills and understandings of human social communication. These skills and understandings develop over time across a range of responsive and dynamic social interactions, mainly with their primary care-givers. The frequent repetition of successful Intensive Interaction activities provides the basis for the activities to gradually develop in content, duration and complexity.

(Note 1: Nind, M. & Hewett, D. (1994). *Access to Communication: Developing the Basics of Communication with People with Severe Learning Difficulties through Intensive Interaction*. London: David Fulton)

**Who is Intensive Interaction for?**

Intensive Interaction is used to meet the social communication needs of people who have, for a range of reasons, a communication and social impairment. Intensive Interaction has been successfully used with:

* people who have severe or profound learning difficulties
* people with complex needs e.g. multi-sensory impairments
* people who have autism; including some people with language who would benefit from further developing their understanding of the 'fundamentals of communication'
* people with late stage dementia

**How do we practice Intensive Interaction?**

**The Intensive Interaction ‘techniques’:** Although generally used in some fluid and dynamic combination, the Intensive Interaction techniques listed below are the most easily identified social communication practices used during Intensive Interaction engagements.

**Sharing personal space:** Sharing proximity with someone in a mutually acceptable way e.g. somehow lying, sitting, standing, or even moving together, touching or apart.

**Making or exchanging eye contact:** Sensitive eye contact can be important for exchanging inclusive social signalse.g. looking at, and looking away games, making dramatic glances, looking in the mirror together.

**Exchanging facial expressions:** Using clear and sustained facial expressions with a personcreates opportunities for these to be better understood and reciprocated e.g. clear smiling, winking; even pulling faces.

**Behavioural mirroring:** Mirroring some aspect of a person’s posture, movements or behaviour can be socially acknowledging and can develop into dynamic behavioural exchanges e.g. mirroring some aspect of a person’s movements or physical activity; adopting someone’s posture.

**Vocal echoing:** Echoing some aspect of a person’s sounds (even any non-symbolic sounds) can be socially acknowledging and even develop into conversation-like exchanges e.g. echoing a person’s sounds or vocalisations, even their breathing patterns.

**Turn taking:** Turn taking involves two people intentionally sequencing their actionsin some way in some inclusive social manner e.g. via sequenced vocal or physical exchanges e.g. clapping or passing things in turns, etc.

**Physical contact:** Sensitive, sociable physical contact can sometimes promote mutual trust and sociability e.g. holding, squeezing or clapping hands together; rhythmically stroking arms or shoulders; walking arm-in-arm; touching foreheads or rubbing noses.

**Joint focus activity:** This is when both people focus their attention on the same object or activity, structuring their social engagement around this object or activity e.g. jointly exploring objects, books and pictures; doing a structured activity together; reading to or listening to music together.

**Burst-pause sequences:** This is when an action is preceded by an extended pause, building an expectancy that something is about to happen e.g. hide-and-appear games; playing 'catch' with a ‘1-2-3’ countdown; using noise escalation games that gradually build then abruptly go quiet.

**Using ‘running commentaries’:** The timely use of a positive ‘running commentary’ on someone’s actions, or on the visible actions of others in a shared environment, can provide a socialising element to an engagement e.g. using limited language to describe a person’s activity e.g. “wow, great, yeah...”, “I can see you ...”, “from me to you...” etc.

**Some Simple Intensive Interaction Dos & Don’ts**

Below are a few important things to keep in mind when using Intensive Interaction with someone with a social or communication impairment:

* **Intensive Interaction is a ‘person-centred’ social communication approach**: we are trying to interact with a person by doing things at their current level, in their preferred way, and at their own tempo. We are doing Intensive Interaction with the person, not to them!
* **Intensive Interaction is about being ‘responsive’** **rather than ‘directive’**: we are trying to interact with the person by, in some way, sensitively joining in with (or reflecting back) some aspect(s) of their current activity or behaviour, rather than trying to lead them into our preferred activity.
* **Good observation is vital** before deciding how best to interact with your person. Sometimes just sitting back and patiently waiting for the person to do something potentially small, but potentially interactive, can give you the best starting point.
* **Go at the pace of the person**: there is no rush; use all the time you need to find, and then further develop, the best means of socially interacting with your person!
* **Don’t be put off if things don’t always go well**: remember, that is the very nature of Intensive Interaction; sometimes things go well, sometimes they don’t … but we reflect, adapt, try again, and thus continue to move forward.
* **Don’t be afraid to ask for help if you need it**:again,working together is at the very heart of developing the best Intensive Interaction practices with and for our people. So, let’s get, and let’s give as much support as we all collectively need!
* **Be sure to share your interactive successes** with anyone and everyone else who should know. If things are going well for you, then let others know the secret of your success!
* Finally, **Intensive Interaction is supposed to be ‘mutually pleasurable’**: so, please try to enjoy interacting with your person, as this is the ultimate purpose of Intensive Interaction.

*(Adapted from the work of Firth, G., Menzies, L. & Guthrie, N., 2012)*

**What does the research into Intensive Interaction tell us?**

Across the increasing body of published research into Intensive Interaction there are a number of common findings. For those people who have had regular Intensive Interaction engagements, clear evidence has been collected to indicate:

* increased initiation and/or levels of social engagement
* increased toleration of, or responsiveness to physical proximity
* increased levels of contingent smiling
* increased levels of eye contact or looking at another person’s face
* increased use of communicative vocalisations
* increased levels of socially significant physical contact
* improved levels of joint attention

Over 40 papers have now been published in peer reviewed learning disability, special education or psychological research and academic journals. You can see further details of specific papers (including full abstracts or summaries) at the Intensive Interaction Institute ‘Publications and Bibliography’ webpage at:

<https://www.intensiveinteraction.org/resources/publications-bibliography/>

**UK Government Support for Intensive Interaction**

The Department of Health explicitly recommends Intensive Interaction as an approach for people with learning disabilities in its strategy document ‘[**Valuing People Now: A three-year strategy for people with learning disabilities**](http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130105064234/http:/www.dh.gov.uk/prod_consum_dh/groups/dh_digitalassets/documents/digitalasset/dh_093375.pdf)**’.**

In the section ‘Valuing ALL people’ (1.6, page 37) the document states that:

*“Addressing the issues for people with complex needs is really about … recognising that the very particular support needs of an individual will mean very individualised support packages, including systems for facilitating meaningful two-way communication.”*

The document then has a whole page (p.38) on **‘Intensive Interaction: facilitating two-way communication’** which sees Intensive Interaction unequivocally identified as a means of achieving such *‘meaningful two-way communication’*.

Full copies of the ‘Valuing people Now’ document are available at:

<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130107105354/http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_093377>

**Some useful Intensive Interaction resources:**

Below are listed just a few of the now numerous Intensive Interaction teaching or learning resources that can help develop individual or collective Intensive Interaction practices.

**Intensive Interaction on the Internet**

The ‘official Intensive Interaction’ website is run by the **Intensive Interaction Institute**, which offers services and products to help promote and develop the theory and practice of Intensive Interaction. Their website is at: [www.IntensiveInteraction.org](http://www.IntensiveInteraction.org)

You can also sign up for the Intensive Interaction Institute’s ‘**e-newsletter**’, which offers information on the Institute’s upcoming events, conferences and courses, at: <https://intensiveinteraction.us13.list-manage.com/subscribe?u=c8c4b5957e7efb3cd9053093d&id=37ad5c3df3>

There are a number of useful Intensive Interaction videos available online; over 30 helpful Intensive Interaction videos can be streamed from Dave Hewett’s ‘YouTube’ channel at: <https://www.youtube.com/user/III209/videos>

There is also an **‘*Intensive Interaction Users*’ Facebook group** with over 4,500 members. The group offers Intensive Interaction feedback and views from across its active membership. You can join the group at: [www.facebook.com/groups/13657123715/](http://www.facebook.com/groups/13657123715/)

**Intensive Interaction Books (available via Amazon)**

[Hewett](wlmailhtml://s/ref=ntt_athr_dp_sr_1?_encoding=UTF8&search-alias=books-uk&field-author=Dave%20Hewett), D. (ed) (2018) **The Intensive Interaction Handbook (2nd Edition)**. Sage Publications, London.

Firth, G. & Barber, M. (2010) **Using Intensive Interaction with a Person with a Social or Communicative Impairment**.Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London.

Nind, M. & Hewett, D. (1994) **Access to Communication: Developing the Basics of Communication with People with Severe Learning Difficulties through Intensive Interaction**.London: David Fulton

**Intensive Interaction Institute DVDs**

‘Intensive Interaction in Action’ DVD by Dave Hewett & Graham Firth.  
This DVD provides extended footage and insightful commentary from a range of practitioners explaining how Intensive Interaction is used in the home, and in educational and care services.

‘Autism and Intensive Interaction’ DVD by Dave Hewett.   
This DVD provides extended case-studies with insightful commentary from a range of practitioners explaining how Intensive Interaction is used with people with autism.

To order these Intensive Interaction Institute DVDs (or a range of other resources) then visit the ‘resources’ page of the Intensive Interaction Institute website at: <https://www.intensiveinteraction.org/resources/shop/>