

# What Skills Do First Responders Need to Communicate Effectively with People with Communication Disorders? A Proposal for Communication Partner Training

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## Introduction

- Individuals with speech, language, and cognitive-communication impairments may be at a higher risk of facing adverse events during an emergency as communication breakdowns are likely to occur given the increased stress the event holds and the increased demand to communicate effectively and quickly
- Though 90% of an officer's day is spent in some form of communication, there is limited research about preventing and navigating communication breakdowns with citizens who have communication disorders<sup>1</sup>
- One communication training offered to police officers during their academy experience included public speaking, voice and articulation, and small group communication and was presented by a fellow officer<sup>1</sup>; Other trainings focus on de-escalation techniques specific to mental health disorders<sup>3, 4, 5, 6</sup>
- Tougher et al. (2004) investigated the effectiveness of a training program to improve police officers' responsiveness to people with a traumatic brain injury by means of improved communication strategies<sup>2</sup>

## Research Question

What do first responders need to communicate effectively with people with communication disorders?

## References

<sup>1</sup>Erickson, K. V., Cheatham, T. R., & Haggard, C. R. (1976, November). A survey of police communication training: *Communication Education: Vol 25, No 4*. <https://www.tandonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/036345276094664>

<sup>2</sup>Togher, L., McDonald, S., Code, C., & Grant, S. (2004). Training communication partners of people with traumatic brain injury: A randomised controlled trial. *Aphasiology*, 18(4), 313–335. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02687030344000535>

<sup>3</sup>Teller, J. L. S., Munetz, M. R., Gil, K. M., & Ritter, C. (2006). Crisis intervention team training for police officers responding to mental disturbance calls. *Psychiatric Services (Washington, D.C.)*, 57(2), 232–237. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ps.57.2.232>

<sup>4</sup>Compton, M. T., Esterberg, M. L., McGee, R., Kotwicki, R. J., & Oliva, J. R. (2006). Brief reports: Crisis intervention team training: changes in knowledge, attitudes, and stigma related to schizophrenia. *Psychiatric Services (Washington, D.C.)*, 57(8), 1199–1202. <https://doi.org/10.1176/ps.2006.57.8.1199>

<sup>5</sup>Shackelford, J., & Nale, S. (2016). Training Law Enforcement Officers to Differentiate Traumatic Brain Injury From Alcohol Intoxication. *Contemporary Issues in Communication Science and Disorders*, 43(Spring), 154–163. <https://doi.org/10.1044/cicsd.43.S.154>

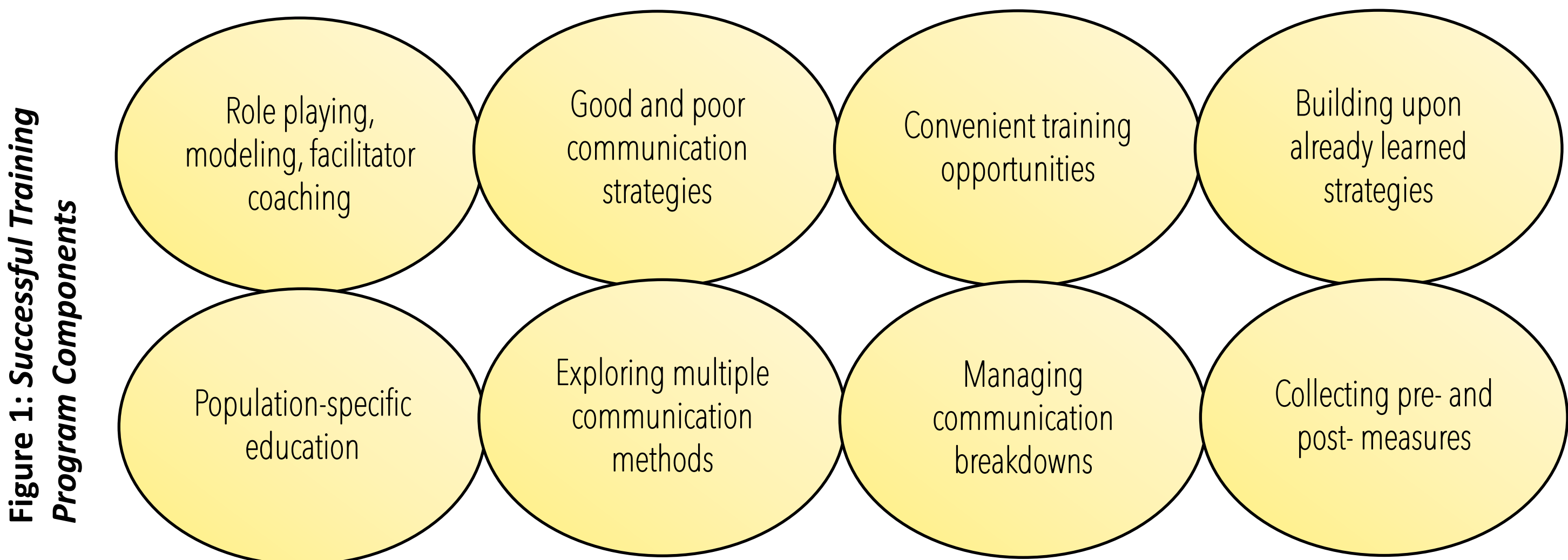
<sup>6</sup>Kelly, E., & Hassett-Walker, C. (2016). The training of New Jersey emergency service first responders in autism awareness. *Police Practice & Research: An International Journal*, 17(6), 543–554. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15614263.2015.1121390>

## Methods

- Comprehensive search of 4 online databases: PubMed, JSTOR, Taylor & Francis Online, Criminal Justice Abstracts
- Search terms in isolation and conjunction: “communication partner training”, “police officers”, “emergency responders”, “aphasia”, “traumatic brain injury”, “mental illness”, “health provider”
- Literature inclusion criteria: Training program for effective communication with specialized populations, written in English, peer reviewed
- Led to 8 articles for review
- Contacted Wilmington Police Dept and New Castle County Police Dept to gain relevant knowledge regarding current communication training practices offered to incoming recruits
- Conducted preliminary scheduling to present proposed training to senior and rookie officers

## Results

- The information from the literature review was then used to develop a communication training program, though was unable to be delivered; excerpts from the slides are presented here



## Discussion & Implications

- The literature review indicates that first responders need education, convenient training opportunities built into the workday, and role-playing communication interactions to communicate effectively with people with communication disorders.
- Speech-language pathologists may be able to facilitate effective communication in the form of a communication partner training and education program
- Attempts were made to provide such training to the Wilmington Police Dept. however was not delivered due to the timeline of this research and the pushback of recruiting an academy class

## Future Directions

- To date, there is limited research that documents the effectiveness a communication partner training will have for first responders
- Future research may wish to consider the following areas:

Effectiveness of such training supported by pre- and post- measures

Inclusion of seasoned and novice first responders

Follow up for maintenance of knowledge gained and frequency of use

State and federal budgets, accessibility, and time constraints

**Figure 2: Excerpts from Proposed Training Program PowerPoint**

**Skills Needed for Effective Communication**  
Training First Responders on Strategies to Communicate with Individuals with Communication Disorders  
Communication Sciences & Disorders  
UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE

**Communication Disorders**  
“An impairment in the ability to send, receive, process and comprehend concepts or verbal, nonverbal and graphic symbol systems.”  
A communication disorder can impact hearing, speech, and/or language.  
(ASHA, 1993)

**Speech & Language Characteristics**

- Difficulty understanding oral or written information, following directions
- Difficulty concentrating or focusing, impaired memory
- Articulation distortions (slurred speech) or slowness to respond to stimuli
- Emotional lability

**Why provide this training**  
Communication breakdowns are more likely to occur during high stress situations  
This makes this population more vulnerable to error and exclusion  
Our goal: To teach communication strategies that are inclusive of all communication patterns

**“Good” Communication Tips**

- Use acknowledgement tokens
  - “mhm,” “yes right,” “I see,” head nods
- Avoid disjunct markers
  - “well” or “as I was saying” → these are dismissive
- Use multimodal communication
  - Gestures, written, air writing
- Ask for clarification if you do not understand

  
(Simmons and Mackie, 1999)

**Make a communication tool kit**

- Speech-language pathologists can help!
- Have materials available in the office and on the go (if possible)
  - Extra paper and pens
  - Simple alphabet, number, or vocabulary boards
- Share what you have learned with your colleagues and other office personnel