Handout 9: Interpersonal Communication Skills

For communication to be effective it means that a person has been able to get their message across and it has been received and understood by another. Effective communication is extremely complex and developing the right skills takes self-awareness, practice and an understanding of how to use different skills in different situations.

We use a wide range of ways to communicate - often at the same time. For example, while we are talking we will also be using body language and facial expressions to express ourselves. At the same time we will be trying to interpret the feedback the other person is giving us about what we are saying. While we are listening, we might be thinking about what we will be saying next, trying to interpret what the other person is saying and what we are seeing in their body language and gestures.

Communication can be made even more complex if we speak with a person whose language is different to our own, or if one of us uses alternative forms of communication such as sign language.

Communication involves not just sending a message. The message needs to be interpreted by the receiver in the way it was intended. It is common for people to misunderstand what is said even if the speaker thinks that they have been very clear. People can be confused by jargon, they may not be able to listen properly because they are worried or tired, they may be thinking more about what they want to say rather than listening.

Non-verbal communication, i.e. the way that we express ourselves without the use of words, is the major form of communication. We are sometimes not conscious of this, which is why self-awareness is so important. You need to be aware what your facial expressions, body language and gestures say to the other person. They can tell someone that you are being open or closed, aggressive or conciliatory, confident or shy. You don't need to tell people this - they can interpret it from your non-verbal communication. If someone is saying they are happy but their body is slumped and their face sad, we are more likely to believe that they are unhappy.

Non verbal language is significantly influenced by cultural background. For example, in some cultures it is considered disrespectful to look someone in the eye, in others it is disrespectful not to! Keeping an open mind about this will help to make sure that there is no misinterpretation.

Listening is a very important skill in being an effective communicator. Active listening lets the other person know that what they are saying is important. We show that we are actively listening with non verbal communication e.g. looking at the person and not at your watch, nodding and using prompts to continue talking such as 'mmm'. Active listening requires that we don't have our head filled with thoughts about, for example, what we want to say, or what we are going to be doing tonight, but we are completely focused on what the person is saying.

Why is this so important? By giving the person a very clear message that they are being listened to, they are more likely to be open in their communication. This helps us to interpret what is being said more accurately.
The way we communicate is dependent upon who we are with, and what we are trying to achieve. For example, people who work together in a similar field may use a lot of jargon or abbreviations that is readily understood by everyone in that particular field e.g. cerebral palsy may be abbreviated to CP. However, this language may not be appropriate when talking with families. When talking with friends you may use a lot of humour and banter. This may not be appropriate in the workplace especially when talking with people outside your own team.