



Active Support

An Essential Component of the Way We Work

Active Support is an approach that is fundamental to provision of effective, person centred support. It is a way of providing assistance to people that focuses on making sure that individuals are engaged and participating in all areas of their life. It enables staff to gain the skills needed to support people well.

It is a universal approach applicable to all support settings and is reflected in the responsibilities of all staff members in the organisation, from a support worker who ensures the people they are supporting are engaged in all the activities and relationships

going on around them, to a Director who views engagement as a key outcome of support.

The essential outcome of Active Support is engagement so the way it looks in practice will vary, depending on the individual requirements of the person being supported, the situation, and the skills of the people around them.

There are four essential components which promote engagement in activities and relationships.



This guidance describes why Active Support is important for **all** the people we support and gives details of the four components, and the strategies we use for organising and improving our efforts, which need to be in place for support to be person centred and effective.

Engagement in Meaningful Activity and Relationships

Engagement is about actively taking part rather than simply being present or passively aware of what's happening. Active Support prioritises people doing things for themselves as much as they can over having things done to or for them. It focuses staff on doing things with people, providing whatever support is necessary to ensure the experience of engagement is successful.

Engagement needs to be meaningful to have any value. If it leads to more opportunities to do other things and interact with other people engagement is meaningful. Doing nothing (including waiting), engaging in self-stimulatory or other challenging behaviour will not have these outcomes and so is not meaningful.

Engagement in meaningful activity and relationships is important for our physical and mental health:

- It helps us keep fit and mentally alert;
- It gives us a sense of personal worth and identity;
- It is important for our personal development:
- It establishes common interests with other people;
- It develops our talents and allows us to show what we can do;
- and it is important because it is a significant part of the quality of life we lead:
- It is the means by which we look after ourselves and our daily needs;
- It provides the basis for friendships and living together.

Supporting engagement is not:

- Just about activities or tasks (at home or in the community): supporting people to take part in relationships and interactions is just as important
- About independence and the acquisition of skills (although this might happen as a result of increasing engagement)



- Dependant on the person understanding the activity or relationship fully.
- About supporting people to do things in a standardised way, but adapting the situation to suit the individual

Restricted experience inhibits real choice making. When people we support have limited experiences we should always be promoting choice between alternatives that will lead to broader experience, not a choice between something and nothing.

If people are apparently choosing not to engage for long periods of time, this doesn't mean things are OK – it tells us that we need to do something different.

Our job is to provide the right support to enable people to actively and successfully engage in the activities & relationships going on around them by using the principles of:

- Every moment has potential
- Little & often
- Graded assistance
- Maximising choice & control

And by organising and improving the support we provide.

Every moment has potential

The people we support are surrounded by opportunities for meaningful engagement:

- the things we all need to do as part of our home life or work responsibilities
- activities that we enjoy or aspire to at home and in the community
- conversations and interactions with all the people around us.

A key component of active support is to see all environments in this way. To continuously search for opportunities to promote engagement enables all staff members to make the most of any situation.

This way of identifying real and naturally occurring opportunities for engagement reduces the need to create artificial, tokenistic and limiting activities.



“In the past we have seen Active Support as something you do at certain times, supporting a particular person to get involved in a specific activity. Perhaps we had to start off that way. But it’s important not to get stuck at that stage. The way we see it now is that there isn’t anything we shouldn’t be supporting people to be involved in – sometimes we have to remind each other because it’s easy to drop off, but we know we need to keep thinking that way. And we know things are going really well when there are no disagreements about **what** we should be supporting people to be involved in, but there’s plenty of discussion of **how**”.

Service Manager, Greater Manchester North

Little & Often

Everything that happens throughout the day is made up of smaller parts or steps. Seeing things this way enables us to identify how people can get involved in the activities and relationships available.

Rather than seeing:

'making a cup of tea'

We see:

- Get cup from cupboard
- Carry kettle to sink
- Hold kettle under tap
- Turn on tap
- Turn off tap
- Take kettle to worktop
- Press down switch to turn on
- etc

Rather than seeing:

'getting a boyfriend'

We see:

- Meeting someone new
- Saying hello
- Shaking hands
- Smiling next time you see them
- Sharing an interest
- Going round for a coffee
- etc

Thinking about activities and relationships as a series of steps means that we can identify:

- parts the person can do for themselves,
- parts we can help them with and
- parts we will need to do for them

in order for the person to be successful.

Most of us are cautious about new experiences, so opportunities for engagement may lead to rejection if they are not presented sensitively. Many people we support respond best to invitations to get involved in small parts of an activity or relationship initially.

Rushing to get things done, or doing things at the wrong time can also make it difficult for people to get involved. New experiences and opportunities work best when staff take the time to support people at their own pace.

It's a mistake to think active support is about expecting people to do every part of any activity. Similarly active support is not about fitting in with the way staff think activities or relationships should be conducted; nor should it be dominated by other people's timescales.



Active Support means we should:

1. Start small
2. Support people to engage in parts of an activity or interaction
3. Enable people to dip in & out
4. Provide many shorter opportunities for engagement throughout the day rather than solely focus on single lengthy events
5. Adapt the way we do things to provide more opportunities for people to be involved

Graded Assistance

People need the right level & type of support at the right time: too much and they will be over-supported, too little and they will be unsuccessful.

Different ways of giving support don't all give the same help. For example, telling someone how to turn on the washing machine provides less assistance than guiding their hand to the dial and helping them turn it.

We need to recognise the different types of support each person needs, for example:

- Environment – things that happen around the activity that help the person understand what to do now, or next.
- Verbal – spoken information or instructions
- Visual – gestures, objects, pictures, facial expressions etc.
- Physical – direct and indirect physical support



And that within each of these types there is a range of levels of support.

In the case of physical assistance this can be represented as below

Physical

Most

Least

Direct physical assistance	Guidance through objects	Touch
Physical support which assists the person through the entire movement or activity.	Using the object to guide the person through the movement	Brief physical contact to initiate action, but not support or assist the person through the entire movement.
Example:		
<i>Staff member places their hand on the person's hand holding the plate and guides them to place it in the dishwasher.</i>	<i>As the person holds the plate the staff member holds the opposite side and moves it towards the dishwasher.</i>	<i>Staff member touches the side of the person's hand holding the plate and gently nudges towards the dishwasher.</i>

We are often too focused on verbal communication and don't appreciate the wealth of non-verbal information people are actually responding to. In practice, different types and levels of assistance can be used together and staff should switch back and forth between them depending on the person's needs and preferences.

Sometimes people need more support, sometimes less – and it also depends on what they are doing.

On work days Gareth will organise his own breakfast himself. He only needs a reminder to put things away after he's finished with them. But when he's not going to work Gareth is up later and then he's making his breakfast at the same time as his house-mate Cheryl. Gareth gets on with Cheryl but can be quite distracted if he's trying to do something while she's around. At breakfast time he'll get confused about what he wants, hesitate about making choices, and often he'll leave the kitchen without eating anything. Staff have realised that it's not that he doesn't want breakfast in these circumstances – it's that he needs more help. He may choose to eat later, but if he wants to prepare his breakfast when Cheryl's in the kitchen, staff provide him with plenty of non-verbal prompts (gestures, eye points, positioning, opening cupboard doors etc) to help him keep on track. If he gets distracted they know they need to wait for a couple of minutes, and then redirect back to the activity when they get an opportunity.

Whenever we are supporting people the aim is to shift (or grade) the amount of assistance we provide so that the person receives just enough help. If one level of assistance is not working then staff need to move on to the next level or add a different type of help so that the person is successful in the activity or relationship. Providing too much assistance can also prevent the person benefitting from more natural support.

Hannah is a young lady with beautiful blue eyes, and an equally enchanting smile. Hannah uses a wheelchair and communicates using nods, gestures and eye movements and touch. Following work with Hannah's family to identify ways to help her broaden her social networks, we began supporting Hannah to attend the local church on Sunday mornings. After attending every Sunday for a few weeks, supported by regular staff, a support plan was developed to ensure all staff could support this activity consistently. The plan included information on: where the church was, where to park, how best to gain access, where Hannah liked to sit, things to take with you, how Hannah liked to participate in the service and what happened after.

One Sunday a few months later, a last minute unavoidable change meant that the support worker taking Hannah to church was unable to read her support plan in depth before leaving. On arriving and entering the church, unaware of where Hannah normally sat, the support worker sat quietly and discreetly at the back of the church with Hannah. After a few moments James, one of the ushers, noticed Hannah and approached her. He welcomed Hannah enthusiastically, and then asked her why she was sat at the back. He turned to the support worker and told them that this is not where Hannah liked to sit and preceded to support Hannah to the front of the church. After seeing to other members of the congregation, James returned to support Hannah throughout the service. After the service James took her to meet others and introduced her to people she had not yet met. Throughout the morning James made sure that Hannah was fully included, and wasn't at all fazed by her disability.

On reflection, we realised that while the support plan had developed a consistent approach, we were in fact providing Hannah with more help than she needed in that situation, and preventing her from experiencing more natural support.

Maximising choice & control

Choice is an important part of people's lives, but it has to be balanced with the responsibilities of domestic life, working and/or being part of a family and community. There are times, in all our lives, when we can't choose **what** we do, but we do get a choice about **when, where** and **how**.

Active Support recognises that choosing within activities and relationships is therefore a valuable opportunity for experiencing choice and control.

In any situation our job is to look for opportunities for the person to express their preferences and be listened to. For example in a supermarket staff might not think to offer the person a choice about the sequence of aisles they visit, but this could be a good opportunity for the person to express their preference, have more control and do their shopping successfully.

If staff frequently respond to preferences expressed by the person they are supporting, the person will learn that there is a point to making choices and will make more of them.

In order for people to be successful they need sufficient support. However, almost any type of support has the effect of reducing the amount of control experienced by the person, e.g. by using a verbal prompt to move onto the next step in the interaction we are effectively preventing them from choosing when to move on by themselves.

So it's important not to over-support a person, providing just enough support for them to be successful without missing valuable opportunities for choice and control.

We sometimes feel we cannot support people in some activities or relationships because they are too risky. Our responsibility in these situations is to assess the risk and then manage it appropriately, not to eliminate it entirely.



In Martin's family there is a tradition that everyone comes round for Sunday lunch. It's a big family so Martin's mother's house is full of people of every generation making lots of noise. Turning up isn't a choice – if you don't go you are being disrespectful to the family. When he lived at home Martin found these gatherings very difficult and he would retreat to his bedroom for as much of the time as possible. When he moved into his own supported living flat, he found he was expected, like all his relatives, to attend his mum's Sunday lunch, but without his bedroom to retreat into. He started refusing to go. His mother got very upset, accusing staff of not trying hard enough. Staff said they'd keep trying but they made no progress. When his brother came round to help one Sunday morning, Martin locked himself in the bathroom, and it was decided that a different approach was required.

Martin had been clear that it was the number of people and the noise that he found difficult, so it was agreed that Martin would come round after lunch. By then things would have quietened down. Some people would have left straight after the meal and the small children would be having naps upstairs. Martin agreed that he would come, just for half an hour to begin with. His mum promised that if he came she would not get upset if he left sooner than he'd said as long as he came.

So Martin now goes to every family Sunday. Sometimes he chooses to come for pudding and then stays for some of the afternoon – sometimes he comes a bit later and stays for tea when everyone's gone home. On the way back to his flat he always says he's glad it's over for another week. He breathes a sigh of relief, and then recounts the family gossip.



Organising and Improving Support

It's important and reassuring for us to have predictability and consistency in our lives. Most of us achieve the levels of predictability we need by following our own routines.

Our routines take account of our unique needs and rhythms, for example 'morning people' generally have routines that are heavier or more intense in the morning and 'night owls' have routines which focus on the evening. We may vary from our routines, either when we want a change or when circumstances dictate, but most of us like some order in our lives.

Active Support recognises that:

- Predictability is important
- People's routines reflect individual preferences and needs
- Some people may need help to manage their own routines
- Co-ordination of support is particularly important when developing predictability with a number of people.

Consistency, being supported in the same way by the different people providing support, is important for most people. It matters because everyone providing support ought to be doing so in the way the person they are helping prefers. If different people do things in different ways, it can make it harder for the individual to work out what he or she needs to do.

Active Support emphasises the need to:

- Establish preferred ways of doing things with each individual
- Ensure staff adopt this pattern rather than expect the person to change when different people support them.

In order to develop predictability and consistency we need to organise our resources to match the needs and preferences of the people we support. All United Response services are required to develop 'A Way to Plan the Day' or shift plan which:

- Indicates what activities and relationships the people we support are involved in.
- Makes it clear when support will be provided.
- Includes other activities that staff need to do, that don't (if only at the moment) involve the people they support.
- Allocates support and activities to specific staff
- Indicates how things fit together – across people and across the passage of time.
- Is viewed flexibly and includes options or contingency plans.
- Is only as detailed as it needs to be, to ensure organised and smooth running support – in general terms less detail is needed when fewer staff are involved and when people we support are more able to organise their own lives.
- Is reviewed in light of what works and what doesn't and new opportunities and goals.

Whatever tools or systems we use to develop consistency and predictability, we need to remember that the outcomes of increasing engagement in activity and relationships are more important than the written plans.

A clear requirement of Active Support is that teams find ways to continue to improve the support they provide. This involves:

- Looking at what people are really doing, rather than relying on plans, records or other paperwork.
- Focusing on activities and relationships as the measure of quality
- Using objective observation and feedback to help each other shape up the quality of support

- Using team meetings and 1:1 meetings as forums for learning about what's working and not working and for identifying new opportunities.

Experience has shown that Practice Leadership is vital in the development of Active Support. Practice leaders identify areas for improvement, coach and model good practice, and review and confirm progress. They also ensure team members are working together effectively and that they are motivated and understand how to apply advice and guidance to their particular circumstances.

After the managers at St Elizabeth's Close attended Practice Leadership training we knew that we wanted to develop peer observations. Observations by managers happened irregularly and staff often felt worried about being watched. We were concerned that staff had not been trained and some had never previously observed others but felt the template form we were going to use was understandable, and that as long as we proceeded with care, staff would be able to take this on.

We wanted to link it with the supervisions seniors conduct with support workers, but we knew that just asking seniors to observe staff they supervised wouldn't necessarily be the best way forward. Like in any team there are variations in how comfortable people feel with each other and how supportive of each other they might be.

So the service manager paired senior support workers up with support workers taking into account the nature of their relationship (how good their working relationship was, how long each had worked there, etc). Even if that meant only positive feedback at the beginning it was a start, and because this is a team that is generally comfortable having robust discussions about what good support looks like and how it can be

improved, we were confident it wouldn't be long before those issues started to influence feedback from observations. And with the support of the managers, staff just went for it.

In quite a short space of time we found that staff were providing concise and helpful feedback to each other, and that this was making a substantial contribution to reducing inconsistent support. As well as providing immediate feedback, observers write up the observation and put notes in their colleague's supervision folder so it can be discussed in their next 1:1. This means that the two processes are connected effectively.

Over time it's become part of the way the team works. Staff feel really comfortable about it. They can see how it helps them get better at their support, and now no-one minds who observes whom. The anxieties we had about peer observations disrupting the effectiveness of the team have proved to be unfounded. By thinking through how to start so that there was minimal chance of any upset, but plenty of opportunity to see the benefit, we introduced a key way of improving our support.

Area Manager – Sheffield

Good Practice Stories

Every day there are scores of opportunities to engage people with profound and multiple disabilities. If you visit Highchurch, you will see Graham sitting on a chair in the laundry smiling while putting washing in the machine, Andrew concentrating intently on holding the thermometer while staff read the water temperature, Sharon laughing as she drops a teabag into her cup, and Kimberley dancing with her upper body to music as she wipes a table.

Everyone that the Highchurch service supports has a severe or profound learning disability and additional physical and/or sensory impairments. "We concentrate on identifying what people are already interested in and then expanding it so that people get involved in a wider range of activities", says Terry, the Service Manager. "For example we know that Kirk has the physical ability to hold and let go of his objects, so it's natural to support him to use the same movement to put his clothes away in a drawer.



"In all circumstances we're looking for small parts of larger activities that we can link with a person's existing interests or skills and for ways to make sure that participation is successful.

"Much of our support is hand over hand so we know that we need to find ways to reduce our support to give the person more control. When

Although we usually try new things by just grabbing opportunities and seeing what happens, we know from experience that we've got to get organised with our shift and support plans so that opportunities can occur in a structured, consistent and predictable way

we're supporting Andrew to put the clothes in the washing machine for instance, we support him hand over hand to get an item half way in, but then we scale back and use a "pushing in" gesture to prompt him to get it all the way in. Of course if he's having an off-day we would provide him with more support, probably using hand over hand more of the time rather than stepping back.

"We're very interested in helping each other get better at our support and we use video, team meetings and 1:1s for this. But we also informally share our experiences as we go and I love it when I hear: "Guess what I tried today..."

"Although we usually try new things by just grabbing opportunities and seeing what happens, we know from experience that we've got to get organised with our shift and support plans so that opportunities can occur in a structured, consistent and predictable way

"Now we're going to use the same principles to support people to develop relationships, initially with people they live with. For example Andrew and Graham spend quite a lot of time sharing the same space and have similar interests, but don't interact much with each other. We're going to use what we've learned, to support them to connect with each other. Because this way of working is normal, it will be a natural step."

Emily lives in her own house supported by a small team who love working with her. They like Emily's sense of humour, her energy and her ability to empathise with others. Emily's experienced lots of difficulties in her life, particularly in her relationships with her family and she has battled with a number of addictions.

The team that support Emily use the principles of Active Support in supporting her at home. For example they will break down activities into smaller parts and negotiate with Emily about which parts she can do on her own, which they'll do together and which staff will do for her. Sometimes Emily will expect more assistance than she needs so staff are good at encouraging her to do things for herself, though they also need to look for those times when Emily really is struggling and they need to provide more help; just as important is the encouragement they provide for Emily to take as much control and choice in her life as possible.

Active Support is a vital ingredient in the success of Emily's support – and her self esteem and sense of achievement, and her pride in herself is the result.

Knowing how successful Active Support is in Emily's home life, the staff team use the same approach in supporting Emily's relationships and her work opportunities. Emily has a stormy relationship with her father: they love each other but often ended up in prolonged and distressing shouting-matches. The team agreed with Emily and her father that they would structure the time they spent together. This meant they could help Emily in a more focused way – they used various types of assistance (from directly intervening

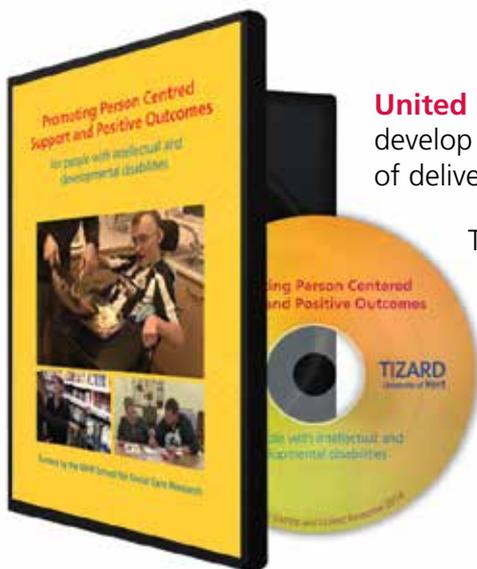
on Emily's behalf, through coaching and advice in advance, to supporting Emily to learn from natural consequences) depending on the circumstances. Emily has incorporated this into her own support plan for how staff should work with her in her relationship with her Dad.



Emily has a job advising Health Centre staff on how to work with people with learning disabilities. Again Graded Assistance has been a key Active Support tool that has enabled staff to support Emily. She had to attend training and staff varied their support style depending on the circumstances – if she was refusing to go, they'd wait before concluding that she wasn't going; if she was uncertain they'd encourage her; if she didn't go they'd support her to learn from the consequences; if she did go they'd help Emily to reflect on the experience and to celebrate her success.

Emily is involved in team meetings, and she and the staff carefully review the support she receives. Staff routinely learn from each other's and from Emily's experience. Active Support is a vital ingredient in the success of Emily's support – and her self esteem and sense of achievement, and her pride in herself is the result.

Person Centred Support Training DVD



United Response and the **Tizard Centre** have worked in collaboration to develop a groundbreaking training DVD illustrating the most effective methods of delivering **person centred support**.

This comprehensive resource provides real life examples accompanied by expert commentary illustrating the subtleties of these techniques.

The DVD is available from United Response (www.unitedresponse.org.uk) at a subsidised cost of £15.00 per disc.

DVD running time – 2 hrs 22 mins

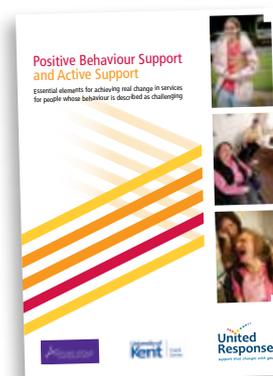
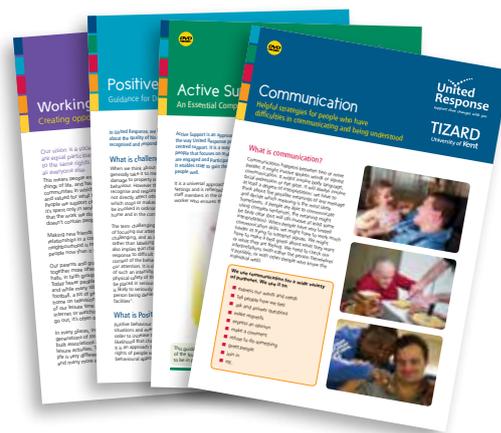
The DVD has been enhanced by a suite of best practice resources that provide the theoretical background to the approaches demonstrated within the DVD.

These resources are available free to download from the United Response website (www.unitedresponse.org.uk). They provide clear, practical and engaging descriptions of **Active Support**, **Positive Behaviour Support**, **Working with Communities** and **Communications** and are designed to be of immediate use to everyone who supports people with a learning disability and other vulnerable individuals.

Also available for free:

Positive Behaviour Support and Active Support: Essential elements in achieving real change in services for people whose behaviour is described as **challenging**. This booklet describes the benefits of Active Support for people with challenging behaviour, along with its role in laying the foundations for the effective implementation of Positive Behaviour Support.

www.unitedresponse.org.uk



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