

# Intensive Interaction



**An introductory guide to Intensive Interaction for those who work with or support people with severe or profound and multiple learning difficulties and/or autism**

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# What is Intensive Interaction?

**Intensive Interaction is an approach that is used to develop positive social communication with people who have communication or social impairments.**

Developed in the 1980s, Intensive Interaction is a social communication approach that is most often used with people who have severe or profound and multiple learning difficulties and/or autism. However, the approach is now also being successfully used 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**'<sup>1</sup> as a means of establishing and developing improved social communication exchanges.

The Fundamentals of Communication (FoCs) are those communication skills and understandings that, in developmental terms, normally precede symbolic speech development: although Intensive Interaction is now also being used with people who already have some level of speech and language comprehension.

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

- developing the ability to attend to another person
- using and understanding eye contacts and facial expressions
- learning to share personal space
- using and understanding sociable physical contacts
- using vocalisations with meaning (for some, speech development)
- taking turns in exchanges of behaviour, and/or sequencing a social exchange with another person
- enjoying being with another person

The techniques of Intensive Interaction were originally developed from research into how young infants naturally develop the highly complex and interrelated skills and understandings of human social communication. These skills and understandings develop over time within, and 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.

Across the increasing body of published research into Intensive Interaction there are a number of common findings, these being:

- 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

(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 is used with many groups of people who, for a variety of reasons, may find social engagement difficult, or may be described as 'difficult to reach'.

Intensive Interaction has been successfully used with:

- people who have very severe or profound and multiple learning difficulties
- people who have severe and complex learning difficulties
- people with multi-sensory impairments
- people who have a diagnosis of autism
- people who have a range of self-stimulatory or socially isolating behaviours
- people with a learning disability and challenging behaviour
- people with late stage dementia

Equally, the approach has been used successfully with people who may be highly social in many ways, but who still need to further develop their social skills in areas like:

- use and understanding of eye contacts and facial expressions
- taking turns in sequences of social behaviour
- developing and furthering vocalisations

Indeed, increasingly Intensive Interaction is used with people who have some speech and language ability, but who can still benefit from further learning and development in the area of the 'fundamentals of communication'.

# Intensive Interaction ‘techniques’

Although generally used in combination, the techniques set out below are the most easily identified social communication practices used within Intensive Interaction engagements.

## Sharing personal space

In Intensive Interaction we look to share proximity in a mutually acceptable way e.g. somehow lying, sitting, standing or even moving together, touching or apart.

## 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, perhaps even echoing their breathing patterns.

## 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.

## Physical contact

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

## Making or exchanging eye contact

Sensitive eye contact can be important for exchanging inclusive social signals e.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 person creates opportunities for these to be better understood and reciprocated e.g. clear smiling, winking; even pulling faces.

## 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.

## Turn taking

Turn taking involves two people intentionally sequencing their actions in some way e.g. via sequenced vocal or physical exchanges e.g. clapping or passing things in turns, etc.

## 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 looking...”, “from me to you...” etc.

**Finally, there are also three other procedural concepts that underpin the use of Intensive Interaction:**

1. **Ascribing Intentionality** this is done by responding to a person's actions (or vocalisations) as if they are intentional communications, even if they aren't.
2. **The activity being 'Taskless' in nature** i.e. there being no set 'task' to complete during an Intensive Interaction engagement; it is the quality of the interaction that is important, not any predetermined outcomes.
3. **Establishing mutual pleasure** we endeavour to make every Intensive Interaction engagement enjoyable and therefore intrinsically rewarding; there is no external reward offered or given, just the mutual pleasure of being with a person.

## Intensive Interaction in UK National Guidance

**Intensive Interaction is explicitly recommended as good practice in learning disability services by the Department of Health.**

The Department of Health explicitly recommends Intensive Interaction as an approach for people with complex learning disabilities in [Valuing People Now: A three-year strategy for people with learning disabilities](#).

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 the section '**Intensive Interaction: facilitating two-way communication**' which sees the approach unequivocally identified as a means of achieving such “*meaningful two-way communication*”.

Full copies of the document are available to be downloaded from the Dept of Health 'Publications Policy and Guidance' page archived at:

[http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130107105354/http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH\\_093377](http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130107105354/http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_093377)

# Some additional Intensive Interaction resources

## Intensive Interaction on the Internet

The Intensive Interaction Institute offers services and products to help promote the theory and practice of Intensive Interaction: [www.IntensiveInteraction.org](http://www.IntensiveInteraction.org)

The Leeds and York Partnership NHS Trust Intensive Interaction:  
<https://www.leedsandYorkpft.nhs.uk/advice-support/intensive-interaction/>

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

## 'Intensive Interaction Users' on Facebook

There is an 'Intensive Interaction Users' Facebook group with over 2,700 members. The group is for anyone who uses Intensive Interaction and offers feedback and views from its active membership. Join the groups at: [www.facebook.com/groups/13657123715/](http://www.facebook.com/groups/13657123715/)

You can also follow **Graham Firth's weekly Intensive Interaction Blog** at:  
<http://intensiveinteractionblog.blogspot.com/>

## Intensive Interaction Books (available via Amazon)

**The Intensive Interaction Handbook** (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed, 2018) edited by Hewett, D.: Sage Publications, London.

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

## Intensive Interaction Information and training packs and 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.

**The Intensive Interaction Information Pack: An introduction to the use of Intensive Interaction for parents, carers and support staff** – an Intensive Interaction training pack (with a special DVD) designed for parents, carers and school support staff to provide an accessible overview of the use of Intensive Interaction with children.

**Intensive Interaction for People with Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities: An introduction to the use of Intensive Interaction for people with profound and multiple learning disabilities** – an Intensive Interaction training pack (with a special DVD) providing an over-view of using Intensive Interaction with people with profound and multiple learning disabilities.

To order one of the training packs, DVDs or other Intensive Interaction resources then please visit the 'resources' page of the Intensive Interaction Institute website:  
<https://www.intensiveinteraction.org/resources/shop/>

## Getting in touch with Graham Firth

Graham Firth, the project lead for Intensive Interaction at Leeds & York Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, provides a range of consultancy, information and training packages on Intensive Interaction.

If you have any questions concerning Intensive Interaction, or wish to find out more about the Leeds Intensive Interaction project and what it can offer in terms of Intensive Interaction training and consultancy or support services, then please contact:

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