

# Person-Centred Active Support



## About Person-Centred Active Support

Active support is a way of supporting people to take part in meaningful, everyday activities, regardless of their level of disability. Activities might include anything from making a meal, gardening or cleaning the bathroom to playing golf, going to the bank or visiting the theatre.

The difference is that staff provide *just enough* support to people to take part in all everyday tasks.

Although active support is not about teaching, people do learn new skills by taking part - staff often say they are surprised at how much someone they have supported for years can actually do. People we support might learn where their milk is kept; they then learn how to take the milk out of the fridge and pour it and, before long, they are making their own tea with perhaps little or no support from staff. Other people's development may seem to be in much smaller steps; for instance, someone might go from pushing staff away but tolerating contact for a few seconds.

Active support focuses on improving the quality of daily life

*"One of the nicest changes has been seeing one man we support starting to see his home as his home. For instance, he is starting to go to the cupboard or the fridge to get things for himself."*

*Annette, support worker*

as experienced by people with learning disabilities, particularly those with severe or profound learning disabilities. It is focused on each individual, on what they want to do. Active support was developed by researchers at the Tizard Centre and at the Welsh Centre for Learning Disabilities, and works best when combined with person-centred planning, positive behaviour support and looking at how people communicate.

- **300% increase** in the amount of **assistance** offered to people
- **94% increase** in engagement
- **24% decrease** in behaviours that challenge staff

Findings from observations of staff support carried out by The Tizard Centre for the first six pilot service taken prior to active support training being delivered and repeated a year later.

## About Engagement

Taking part in activities is how we grow and develop as people, how we make new relationships and build relationships with people in our community, and gives us choice and control over our lives. With active support, we talk about "engagement" - in both meaningful activities and relationships. Engagement:

- helps keep us fit, physically and mentally
- makes us feel worthwhile and gives us a sense of well-being
- let us be who we are
- links us with other people who share the same interest, which can lead to friendships and healthy relationships with the people we live with
- develops our skills and shows what we can do
- means we can be independent and autonomous
- is how we look after ourselves and our daily needs.

Engagement can be:

- using materials; e.g. chopping vegetables, laying a table, loading a washing machine, packing shopping into bags in the supermarket.
- interacting with people; e.g. talking or listening, or paying attention to what someone does, waving to a neighbour
- taking part in a group activity; e.g. playing football or cheering on your team.



## The Four Essentials

### Every moment has potential

Active support is a way of working, adopted by staff. To start with, you work at recognising that every moment has potential - it is not about thinking of special activities someone could do, but about how staff could involve them in what is naturally occurring right now. You don't have active support "sessions"; people we support don't "do" active support.

*"We found Tom really liked animals. We supported him to buy some pets, which he looks after, and he now works on a farm, mucking out and feeding the animals."*

*Juliet, house manager*

It is something that should happen naturally after a while, and should where possible be led by the person being supported. And it can be spontaneous. Staff are trained to look out for any and every opportunity to support people to take part, to do something they may have never done before, or to do something that even staff perhaps thought they could not or would not do.

Staff need to stop themselves from doing the things they do automatically, and think about how they can involve someone else in doing it instead. For example, one support worker realised that, instead of drawing the curtains in the lounge every morning, she could support someone else to do it. The man she supports uses a wheelchair and often has his hands tightly clenched - she realised his strong grip would be perfect for pulling curtains. She acknowledged his skills.

### Little and often

Sometimes the people we support may refuse to take part or appear to show no interest in being supported to do something. There may be many reasons for this - they might not like doing it, might not understand what is being asked of them, might not have done it before or might not be used to concentrating on a task for any length of time. They might have a history of being discouraged.

*"Sometimes you only get 30 seconds, but that's still 30 seconds when they were doing something."*

*Paul, deputy manager*



The secret for staff is to not give up, and to keep trying - little and often. This means the people being supported can build up their experience of success and enjoyment, which will motivate them to take part in the future.

### Graded assistance

Sometimes it can be hard to know how much assistance someone needs; perhaps you haven't worked with this person before, so don't know what they can do; or perhaps you've supported them for a while but haven't realised the new skills and confidence

they've developed since being actively supported.

Active support means staff can recognise and offer the correct level of support; too much support, and staff end up taking over - too little, and people may end up failing in the task. Graded assistance means changing the amount of support until you reach the most appropriate level - and always starting with the least amount of support. This might be verbal prompting, gesturing or offering somebody a tool or implement, perhaps showing them what is required, until eventually you might try hand-under-hand, or hand-with-hand. Staff may need to vary the amount of support over time or even during and activity.

### Choice and control

The aim of active support is to get staff working around the individuals they support, so that people can be involved in activities as and when they want to be. This does mean that some planning is needed, and that staff work together as a team.

Choice and control also means that staff need to respect the choices that people make. For example, if someone stacks the dishwasher differently, as long as it is safe it is not wrong. Their way may not be your way - but their choices should, wherever possible, be respected.

*"He is far more independent"*

*Penny Snell, house manager, managed one of the services that piloted active support. This is her experience:*

*"I have seen a marked increase in opportunities for people to make choices and decisions for themselves since active support has been in place. One man I support is far more independent than I've ever seen in the seven years I've supported him. There has also been a decrease in challenging behaviour.*

*One Saturday night he took his coat of the hook and stood by the door. We hadn't planned to go out, but I ensured there was cover for the people at home, and we went off down the pub! It's great that he's now making really clear choices."*

## How people are trained

There are four elements to the way we train staff in active support at Avenues:

- workshops
- on the job training
- practice leadership - that is, managers providing coaching and direct support to their staff
- regular observations and feedback

Staff will work as a team to begin with, attending a workshop to find out more about what active support is and what it means to people.

There is then some intensive active support training on-the-job from trained trainers. Managers of services are expected to demonstrate good practice. They are also trained to observe staff and give feedback - an important part of the process.

*"Having observations really helps. When you're working with the same people all the time, you can do things that you're not aware of, so having that feedback is a good thing. You get ideas from other people who've tried doing something different."*

***Tibs, support worker***



## Working as a team

Communication and working together as a team are essential elements to making active support work for people.

Initial research has shown that active support training can have a very beneficial effect on working relationships within the team and can significantly increase people's job satisfaction. While further research needs to be carried out in this area, the combination of practice leadership, clarity of roles and sharing information within the team all work to make for a happier working environment - which is better for staff, but also better for the people they are supporting.

## Maintaining momentum

It is important that staff teams keep up momentum, constantly challenging themselves and the people they support to try new things or new ways of doing something. Managers need to ensure that active support is always on the agenda, and that goals are set and successes tracked. Over time, the people supported should take more and more of the lead - some staff have found people have ended up showing them how they wanted to be supported to do something, thereby directing the process.

*"I do hoovering, cleaning and stuff. It's good - I do all that."*

***Neil, Greenwich service***

It is also essential that the whole organisation is on board; everyone needs to recognise the importance of active support if implementing it is to be truly successful.

### *"He Changed So Much"*

**Mr and Mrs French have a son supported by Avenues living in Redhill, Surrey:**

"We couldn't believe it - all of a sudden he seemed to change so much. We got so used to doing everything for him. Then Alex just started doing things himself. He responded to what was happening in his home.

"There was a time when we couldn't leave a plate or a cup in front of Alex, because he would tip it over. Now we can have flowers in the fireplace and he'll leave them alone. If there's a pot plant on the table that he doesn't want there, he'll pick it up carefully to put it on the shelf.

"He likes things to be tidy and he'll tidy up his

bedroom when he comes to stay with us. In fact, it's sometimes a struggle to stop him from doing things! It's made our life easier - we don't have to be on our guard now. The main difference is that we can just leave him, and know he won't wreck anything. He chooses what he wants to drink, and he'll make the drink himself, getting all the crockery out for it.

"The team [Alex's service] are very good here; people [who live here] are not left to sit and rock. He's out and occupied and he's not so bored. He does like to get out. He's been up to London, and goes horse-carriage riding and to bingo. When he comes to stay with us, he loves shopping in the supermarket - he'll tear around with the trolley."



## Responding to Diverse Needs

Active support is not just about how people are supported to take part in everyday tasks like housework, gardening or shopping. It is also about how we can better support people to take part in their communities.

One Medway service adapted their support to meet the cultural needs of an individual:

A month after active support training, staff began to notice a significant difference in the way the people they supported took part in activities. The biggest change was in Sukhvinder, who seemed to especially enjoy being supported to cook. As a result, staff noticed her becoming more alert, energetic and more vocal.

The service also began working to improve Sukhvinder's links with the Sikh community. One Avenues support worker and practising Sikh advised staff on aspects of Sikhism including religious festivals and food, and helped the service to introduce some traditional music. In addition, the service supports Sukhvinder to go to a Sikh temple every Friday. She has since been invited to dinner with one of the families from the temple.

## About Avenues

Our vision is to support people to enjoy their lives within their communities. Active support is absolutely central to how we support people with learning disabilities to do this. It means they are supported to be independent and make real choices about their lives and the way they want to meet them. This is true, regardless of the extent of someone's disability.

At Avenues, the people we support come first. We are committed to offering the highest quality services to people, supporting them to exercise the greatest possible control over decisions which affect them, and for that control to develop over time.

We are realistic about people's hopes and needs, and will go the extra mile to try and meet them.

We work in London, Cambridge and the south east, providing not-for-profit support services to people with complex or challenging needs.

"Avenues is one of the first organisations in England to implement active support across its services. I've been impressed at their commitment to making this work - the whole organisation is involved and motivated in a way that's rarely seen in organisations of this size. As a result, we have seen active support have a positive effect on people's lives"

*Dr Julie Beadle-Brown, senior lecturer,  
Tizard Centre*

## Would you like to find out more about active support at Avenues?

Contact: Aislinn Hutchinson, PCAS Coordinator  
Email: [aislinn.hutchinson@avenuesgroup.org.uk](mailto:aislinn.hutchinson@avenuesgroup.org.uk)  
Tel: 020 8308 2905

Avenues Group Head Office, River House, 1 Maidstone Road, Sidcup, Kent DA14 5TA  
Tel: 020 8308 2900

Email: [info@avenuesgroup.org.uk](mailto:info@avenuesgroup.org.uk) [www.avenues.org.uk](http://www.avenues.org.uk)

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