

# Active support from staff pays dividends, unlocking the good life for people with complex needs

**Nobody is too disabled, too challenging or too autistic to enjoy diverse experiences – they just need more imaginative help. Providing that skilled support does not require more staff and need not cost more money, finds our research.**

'Imagine John, who cannot communicate verbally or understand many words, sitting in a wheelchair in front of a television. John's not really watching it. Even if he was, he does not have the communication skills to discuss it. A staff member is sitting beside him. Every now and again, the staff member comments, but there is no real interaction. It's a false conversation about a programme that John doesn't understand.'

Dr Julie Beadle-Brown, Reader in Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities at the Tizard Centre, University of Kent, is describing a not uncommon scene in supported accommodation for people with complex needs. 'The member of staff notices that the windows are dirty. "Gosh, John," he says, "the windows are very dirty. I'll go and clean them." He gets a cloth and some liquid, comes back and, as he is cleaning, he might be saying: "Look John, there's a bird." John doesn't seem to be taking anything on board, but he is watching. The staff member finishes and sits down again.'

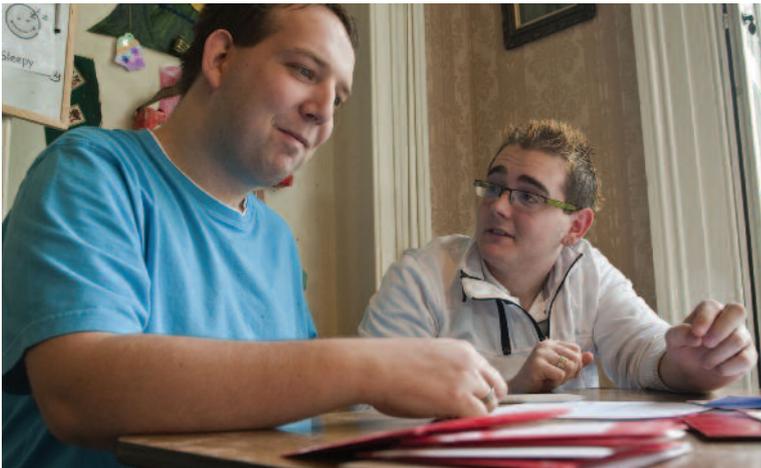
Dr Beadle-Brown explains what would have worked better: 'The member of staff sees the window is dirty and thinks: "How can I help John to clean it?" He brings the materials and cloth, shows them to John,

points at the window and says: "Let's clean the window."

'He pushes the wheelchair up close, put John's hand on the sprayer, holding the bottom of the bottle so it does not spray his face and helps him spray as far as he can. He gives John the cloth and supports him to clean the first bit that he sprayed. Then he helps John to stand up to spray the top bit or to use a long-handled wiper to clean the top. All the time the staff member is guiding, pointing out things and using objects not just words. When they are finished, they look at the window to admire how they can see through it now. The staff member smiles broadly so that, even if John does not understand everything that is said, the smiling and pointing gives positive reinforcement.'

These scenes show how 'active support' provides engagement in meaningful activities and interaction for someone who has complex needs, says Dr Beadle-Brown.

'Every moment has potential, whether it is in the home, the garden, the local community, whether during housework, leisure, an interaction with someone else or in a job. Everything can offer the



*'Vacuuming is now one of Mark's favourite activities. When you get it out of the cupboard, his face lights up and he follows you to the room that needs doing.'*

Elaine, team member  
(from study by Ashman et al)

person with complex needs a chance to have a go, make choices and develop new skills and interests.'

Dr Beadle-Brown's research into supported accommodation has found that, if people are provided with this type of consistent and active support, they experience better outcomes and quality of life. Crucially, her study of 110 people using 35 different services has found that providing skilled support does not require more staff and costs no more than providing mediocre or poor support.

Although some consistent active support was found for about one third of people, most people, especially those with challenging behaviour, did not experience consistently good support from staff. On average people spent three quarters of their time in relative isolation with no contact of any type from staff around them. They also rarely interacted with other people they lived with.

The study found that many people, although rated by staff as having very little capacity for using or understanding

words, were subject only to verbal communication – staff were not using photos, pictures, signs, objects or other non-verbal means to communicate.

Dr Beadle-Brown is working with organisations such as United Response and the Avenues Group to ensure that more organisations know about active support. She and colleagues have developed a training module, 'Promoting Active Support' (Pavilion Publishing), and a number of other resources with colleagues in United Response.

Her book with the late Jim Mansell, *Active Support* (Jessica Kingsley publishers), describes active support and the research behind it. She received some additional funding from SSCR for video materials aimed at demonstrating how to provide skilled support for those with complex needs. Her report is being sent to David Behan, Chief Executive of the Care Quality Commission, along with commissioners of learning disability services and others involved in the provision of support for people with learning disability and autism.

**Project:** Cost and outcomes of skilled support for adults with complex needs in supported accommodation

**Lead:** Dr Julie Beadle-Brown

**Institution:** University of Kent

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