

Experiences of support staff

What makes interactions with people with profound intellectual disabilities meaningful?

Meaningful moments of interaction are important for support staff to keep doing their intensive work¹; these moments contribute to their job satisfaction and motivation. However, for support staff working with people with profound intellectual disabilities², recognizing such moments and sharing them with others is not always self-evident. The Academic Collaborative Centre Living with an Intellectual Disability (AWVB) therefore investigated — in collaboration with care organization Amerpoort — what makes support staff experience daily interactions with people with profound intellectual disabilities as meaningful.



About the study

In the study, three support staff watched video footage of moments when they were interacting with a child or young person with profound intellectual disabilities. They indicated which moments were meaningful to them and explained why. Their answers were systematically analyzed, after which the researchers investigated whether there were any patterns in what support staff said.

¹ Penninga, W., Nijs, S. L. P., van Bakel, H. J. A., & Embregts, P. J. C. M. (2022). Meaningful moments of interaction with people with profound intellectual disabilities: Reflections from direct support staff. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 35(6), 1307-1316

² For the sake of readability, in this factsheet, we have opted to refer to 'people with profound intellectual disabilities and people with profound intellectual and multiple disabilities' as 'people with profound intellectual disabilities'.

Key findings

The study reveals two overarching themes that determine the experience of meaningful interactions with people with profound intellectual disabilities:

1. *Experiencing meaning in actions*

Support staff identify specific behaviors and actions that contribute to a sense of meaning. These can be small gestures, such as eye contact or a subtle movement by people with profound intellectual disabilities, which evoke a sense of intentionality in support staff. It can also involve the support staff's own actions.

Example for number 1

Support staff Paula experienced moments in which Christine clearly expressed her needs as meaningful. Or when Christine showed she understood what was happening or anticipated a situation.

"Because she really... turns towards me... as if she [recognizes] 'Okay, we are going to do something else!'"

2. *Experiencing meaning in 'being together'*

In addition to concrete actions, 'togetherness' plays a crucial role. Experiencing a shared moment with people with profound intellectual disabilities can be of great value to support staff. This can involve appreciating togetherness in the moment itself, such as reciprocity. It can also involve the appreciation of being together over a longer period of time, for example in the form of

'inside jokes' because these can strengthen the mutual bond between them.

Example for number 2

Support staff Feline experienced moments of mutual contact with Bob as meaningful.

"These are very rewarding moments: the mutual contact. The shared fun. [His] giggling is really uplifting. A precious moment."

In addition, support staff often value moments of interaction based on what they consider important in their work, such as increasing the influence of people with profound intellectual disabilities. Reflection and experience help support staff to recognize and appreciate meaningful moments of interaction more consciously.

Conclusion

In order to experience meaningful moments of interaction with people with profound intellectual disabilities, it is important that support staff learn to "see" these moments. First and foremost, this means noticing signals from people with profound intellectual disabilities and assigning meaning to them yourself. Next, it is necessary for support staff to appreciate 'what happens' during the moment of interaction based on their own professional goals and values.

This factsheet is based on the article [Situational experiences of meaningfulness of support staff during their interactions with people with profound intellectual disabilities: An explorative study](#)

Authors: drs. Wieneke Penninga (Amerpoort/AWVB/Tilburg University), dr. Lex Hendriks (Radboud Universiteit), prof. dr. Hedwig van Bakel (AW Jeugd/Tilburg University) and prof. dr. Petri Embregts (AWVB/ Tilburg University), 2025, Journal of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

Want to know more? Contact Luciënne Heerkens, knowledge manager at the AWVB: awvb@tilburguniversity.edu

september 2025

www.awvb.nl/en