

# Effective Communication with Families using the CANS

*Courtesy of Mary Beth Rautkis, PhD via canstraining.com*

## Introduction

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Communication happens constantly—even when you are not communicating verbally, you are communicating through your body posture, gestures, eye contact, etc. The CANS is at the heart, a communication tool, and how you communicate when you are working through the CANS is as important as the words on the printed page. Remember, this is not a “form” to be completed, but the reflection of a story that needs to be heard.

This section is about communicating—it applies to the CANS, but it can also be a model for any kind of situation when you need to get and to give information.

## Establishing a level of comfort

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At a very basic level, people need to feel comfortable in order to share information, and there are ways to promote a feeling of comfort.

### Eye contact

Different cultures and subcultures, even different individuals have different standards for good eye contact. Try to be sensitive to their level of comfort with eye contact. Eye contact is not staring—it is moving your eyes from the pages to the person's face in a way that feels comfortable for you and for the person you are talking with. You will know if someone is uncomfortable with eye contact—they will not meet your gaze, may look at a point above your head, shift their body etc. It is important to respect this and to shift your gaze to the paper or to another place. If you feel that the individual is comfortable with eye contact, then try to arrange the chairs or table so that you can comfortably move your eyes from the pages to the person that you are talking with.

### Personal space

Similarly, people have different degrees of comfort with personal space. You will know what the right distance is—people will let you know verbally or non-verbally if you are in their personal space. Again, it is important to respect these boundaries.

### Physical environment

Sometimes this is not within your control, but both of you should be comfortable and able to talk. If the environment is less than ideal, try to find out what would increase the comfort level. For example, in a crowded space you could ask “are you comfortable with this sitting arrangement”?

### Self-awareness

When you are uncomfortable, chances are you are communicating that to the other person. You may fidget, shift, not make eye contact, etc. Someone can only be comfortable if you are comfortable. If you are feeling a sense of discomfort, take a few seconds to think about why that is. Is it the information that you are receiving? Is it the physical space? Make an effort to find out where your discomfort is coming from and think about how you can make the situation less uncomfortable.

## Order of the CANS items

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The CANS is organized into parts: you can start with any of the sections—Life Domain Functioning or Mental Health, or Risks or Child/youth Strengths, or Parent/Caregiver Needs and Strengths. This is your judgment call. Sometimes, people need to talk about needs before they can acknowledge strengths. Sometimes, after talking about strengths, then they can better explain the needs. Trust your judgment, and when in doubt,

always ask—“we can start by talking about what you feel that you and your child/youth need, or we can start by talking about the things that are going well and that you want to build on. Do you have a preference?” It is also a good idea to know the CANS. If you are constantly flipping through the pages, or if you read verbatim without shifting your eyes up, it can feel more like an interview than a conversation. A conversation is more likely to give you good information, so have a general idea of the items.

Also, some people may “take off” on a topic. The great thing about the CANS is that you can follow their lead. So, if they are talking about anger control and then shift into something like—“you know, he only gets angry when he is in Mr. S’s classroom”, you can follow that and ask some questions about situational anger. So that you are not searching and flipping through papers, have some idea of what page that item is on.

## Making the best use of the CANS

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To increase family involvement, and understanding, encourage the family to look over the CANS prior to the time you sit down to fit it out. The best time is your decision—you will have a sense of the timing as you work with each family. Families often feel respected as partners when they are prepared for a meeting or a process.

A copy of the completed CANS should be provided to each family. Encourage families to contact you if they wish to change their answers in any area that they feel needs more or less emphasis.

## Listening using the CANS

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Listening is the most important skill that you bring to the CANS. Everyone has an individual style of listening. The better you are at listening, the better the information you will receive. Some things to keep in mind that make you a better listener and that will give you the best information:

### Use nonverbal and minimal verbal prompts

Head nodding, smiling and brief “yes”, “and”—things that encourage people to continue.

### Be nonjudgmental and avoid giving personal advice

You may find yourself thinking “if I were this person, I would do X” or “that’s just like my situation, and I did X”. But since you are not that person, what you would do is not particularly relevant. Avoid making judgmental statements or telling them what you would do. It’s not really about you.

### Be empathetic

Empathy is being warm and supportive and acknowledging the feelings of another. It is understanding another person from their own point of reference. You demonstrate empathetic listening when you smile, nod, and maintain eye contact. You also demonstrate empathetic listening when you follow the person’s lead and acknowledge when something may be difficult, or when something is great. You demonstrate empathy when you summarize information correctly. All of this demonstrates to the person you are talking to that you are with them.

### Be comfortable with silence

Some people need a little time to get their thoughts together. Sometimes, they struggle with finding the right words. Maybe they are deciding how they want to respond to a question. If you are concerned that the silence means something else, you can always ask “does that make sense to you”? “Or do you need me to explain that in another way”?

## Paraphrase and clarify—avoid interpreting

Interpretation is when you go beyond the information given and infer something—in a person’s unconscious motivations, personality, etc. The CANS is not a tool to come up with causes. Rather, it identifies things that need to be acted upon. Rather than talk about causation, focus on paraphrasing and clarifying. Paraphrasing is restating a message very clearly in a different form, using different words. A paraphrase helps you to (1) find out if you really have understood an answer; (2) clarify what was said, sometimes making things clearer; (3) demonstrate empathy. For example, you ask the questions about health, and the person you are talking to gives a long description. You paraphrase by saying “Ok, it sounds like X, is that right? Would you say that is something that you feel needs to be watched, or is help needed? “

## Redirect the conversation to parents’ own feelings and observations

Often, people will make comments about other people’s observations such as “well, my mother thinks that his behavior is really obnoxious.” It is important to redirect people to talk about their observations: “so your mother feels that when he does X, that is obnoxious. What do YOU think?” The CANS is a tool to organize all points of observation, but the parent or parent/caregiver’s perspective is the most important at the time when you are doing the CANS. Once you have his/her perspective, you can then work on organizing and coalescing the other points of view. Any statements made by others can be noted in the comments section.

## Acknowledge feelings

People will be talking about difficult things and it is important to acknowledge that. Simple acknowledgement such as “I hear you saying that it can be difficult when . . .” demonstrates empathy.

## Wrapping it up

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At the end of the CANS, we recommend the use of two open-ended questions. These questions ask if there are any past experiences that people want to share that might be of benefit to planning for their child/youth, and if there is anything that they would like to add. This is a good time to see if there is anything “left over”—feelings or thoughts that they would like to share with you.

Take time to summarize with the family the areas of strengths and of needs. Help them to get a “total picture” of their child/youth and family, and offer them the opportunity to change any ratings as you summarize or give them the “total picture”.

Take a few minutes to talk about what the next steps will be. Now that you have the information organized into a framework, it is time to move into the next stage—planning.

You might close with a statement such as: “OK, now the next step is a “brainstorm” where we take this information that we’ve organized and start writing a plan—it is now much clearer which needs must be met and what can be built. So let’s start . . .”