

# From Little Things, Big Things Grow: The Impact of an AAC Peer Training Program at an Inclusive Primary School

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## Short Abstract

**Introduction:** Peer training can be an effective strategy to support communication between students who use AAC and their peers (Therrien et al., 2016). In this clinical case study, the impact of a peer training program at an inclusive primary school in South Australia is explored.

**Method:** Two Grade 4 students with communication disability attend the school. A 9-week peer training program was delivered to the Grade 4 cohort. A modified Canadian Occupational Performance Measure (COPM) was completed by all students pre- and post-intervention; each student identified a goal and rated it on a 1-10 scale. A change score of 2 or more points is a clinically important change.

**Results:** There were 33 valid COPM change scores at the end of the program. 82% of the students reported a change score of 2 or more points on a measure of 'performance', and 70% of the students responded with a change score of 2 or more points on a measure of 'satisfaction'. Other changes following the program included more spontaneous conversations between all the students, and increased implementation of aided communication supports throughout the school.

**Discussion:** Peer training was found to be an effective strategy for strengthening the connection between students with communication disability and their peers. It resulted in more authentic inclusion of these students, and an increased awareness of communication disability and AAC across the broader school community.

**Conclusion:** In this case, peer training was found to be an effective strategy for supporting the inclusion of students who use AAC.

## Long Abstract

### Introduction

Peer training is considered to be an effective strategy to support communication between students who use AAC and their peers (Therrien et al., 2016). For students with communication disability, forming genuine relationships and being able to communicate with their peers is an important component of authentic inclusive education. To support the inclusion of two students with communication disability at an inclusive primary school, a peer training program was delivered to a cohort of Grade 4 students. The impact of this training program was

evaluated, in terms of individual student outcomes, but also the impact on the broader school community.

## **Method**

A 9-week peer training program (30-minute sessions) was delivered to the Grade 4 cohort at the school. The following long-term outcomes were established;

1. The Grade 4 cohort are confident communicating with students with communication disability without the presence of an adult communication partner
2. There is increased awareness and knowledge of alternative communication in the school community
3. The school has communication boards and visual supports available in the environment for all students

A modified Canadian Occupational Performance Measure (COPM) was completed by all the Grade 4 students pre- and post-intervention. Within the COPM, the students identified a goal that they wanted to achieve (e.g. “I want to say something without talking and talk to someone that can’t talk), and then rated this goal (on a scale of 1-10) against three measures; importance, current performance and satisfaction with current performance. A change score of 2 or more points is a clinically important change.

During the first session, the students participated in an activity where they had to describe a picture to a peer without talking. At the end of this session, the students reflected that communicating without speech was “frustrating”, “annoying”, “confusing”, “time consuming” and “hard work”. This laid the foundation for developing the students’ understanding about the potential challenges of using AAC to communicate. The focus of the program then moved to building fluency using PODD communication books. The students with communication disability at the school use different types of PODD books, so the Grade 4 students needed to develop their fluency with both 1-page and 2-page opening PODD books.

The Grade 4 students then became the ‘teachers’, and taught their buddy class (Grade 2 students) how to use PODD communication books. This ensured that knowledge was being shared beyond just the Grade 4 students, and also provided the Grade 4 students with an opportunity to reflect on how much their skills had developed. Finally, to create a more communication accessible school, the students contributed to the design of two communication boards for the playground.

## **Results and Discussion**

The peer training program was evaluated firstly by reviewing the COPM scores for clinically important change. There were 33 valid COPM change scores at the end of the program. The measure of ‘importance’ (i.e., “how important is this goal to me?”) on the COPM is only scored pre-intervention; the mean rating of importance was 7, potentially reflecting that even pre-intervention, the students viewed being able to communicate using their peers’ communication systems as important. On the measure of ‘performance’, 82% of the students reported a change score of 2 or more points, which represents a clinically important change for the majority of the cohort. On the measure of ‘satisfaction’, 70% of the students responded with a change score of 2 or more points.

The peer training program was also evaluated against the long-term program outcomes has been established. The first outcome was that the Grade 4 cohort would be confident communicating with students with communication disability without the presence of adult communication partners. There were some significant changes observed in how the Grade 4 students interacted with their peers with communication disability post-intervention. This included the students approaching their peer with communication disability when he arrived at school each morning, and providing a partner-assisted scan using his PODD communication book, without any assistance from adult communication partners.

The second outcome related to increased awareness and knowledge of alternative communication in the school community. There were approximately 90 students who directly participated in the peer training program (the Grade 4 cohort and their Grade 2 buddy classes). Anecdotally, some students were reported to have talked to their parents and siblings about PODD communication books and AAC. Furthermore, the Grade 4 students presented at a school assembly using PODD communication books, therefore increasing the awareness of a broader group of students and educators about alternative communication.

The final outcome was that the school would have communication boards and visual supports available in the environment for all students. The school used the proceeds from 'casual clothes' day to fund the creation and installation of the playground communication boards that the students had designed. Furthermore, aided language displays and visual supports were embedded throughout the school environment (e.g., on classroom doors, in the front office).

There were also some additional, unexpected outcomes of the peer training program. This included a story in the local paper about the installation of the playground communication boards, which provided an opportunity for increased awareness of communication disability in the broader community. Furthermore, the Grade 4 students initiated the invention of 'group games' to play with PODD communication books, reflecting that the students not only felt confident using AAC, but wanted to take ownership of how AAC was going to be implemented long term.

## **Conclusion**

The delivery of a 9-week peer training program resulted in meaningful outcomes for all the students involved in the program. Most of the students demonstrated increased awareness of communication disability and AAC, and increased confidence interacting with their peers using AAC. The students with communication disability experienced more spontaneous interactions with their peers, and increased inclusion in social and play-based activities. There was also evidence of increased awareness of AAC across the broader school community. It is recommended that other schools consider implementing such programs, to help support the genuine inclusion of students with communication disability.