

Communication Champions: Revitalising a culture of communication within day and lifestyle services

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Short Abstract

In 2023, Scope launched a pilot project to revitalise a culture of inclusive communication within adult Day and Lifestyle services. The goal was to engage and inspire disability support staff to use AAC, to re-establish the presence of environmental communication aids and implement evidence based strategies that were suitable to the unique environment of each site.

To do this, a Communication Champion Program was established. This involved recruiting and training a community of passionate support workers who were then allocated time in their role to produce, promote and implement use of communication aids at their site

The program was based on a model that had existed under a grant-funded model prior to the introduction of NDIS. This modern re-boot of this approach has been updated using contemporary technology and resources to make impactful change within the current disability context.

Strategies that influenced the success of the program include investment in training champions in evidence based practice, continuing support and connection with a speech pathologist, frequent peer support opportunities and access to resources to easily access or customise communication aids. Outcomes of the program show evidence of improvements in services to change the environment to help customers communicate, and to use strategies to include customers in daily activities.

If you are trying to save on word count you could exclude this as you mention it in the previous sentence, so can be inferred. Up to you though.

Long Abstract

In 2023, Scope launched a pilot project to revitalise a culture of inclusive communication within adult Day and Lifestyle services. The goal was to engage and inspire disability support staff to use AAC, to re-establish the presence of environmental communication aids and implement evidence based strategies that were suitable to the unique environment of each site. To do this, a Communication Champion Program was established. This involved recruiting and training a community of passionate support workers who were then allocated time in their role to produce, promote and implement use of communication aids at their site. The program was based on a model that had existed under a grant-funded model prior to the introduction of

NDIS. This modernised approach has been updated using contemporary technology and resources to make impactful change within the current disability context.

Scope Australia operates 22 Day and Lifestyle programs across metro and regional Victoria. Each service presents with a unique combination of participant communication styles, staff skills and culture. During consultations prior to the commencement of the program, common themes were raised at each site regarding barriers to use of AAC. These barriers included opportunity to learn to use existing aids, available time to create aids, and prioritisation and focus on other essential tasks such as mealtime and personal support. Staff shortages were reported to amplify these barriers further. These barriers present risk of reduced use of personal communication aids, lack of presence of environmental aids in daily programs, and overall reduced inclusion of participants in programs (McConkey, & Collins, 2010)

Some Scope Day and Lifestyle programs have previously been involved in a highly successful communication coordinator network, which involved a designated trained staff member allocated to create aids and upskill their fellow team members in use of AAC (Johnson et al., 2010). This program had slowly diminished and eventually died out completely in 2019 due to lack of grant funding to run the program. However, the memory of this program remained for those who experienced its positive impacts, and the passion for AAC use remained for some former communication coordinators who had now made their way to management roles within Scope Day and Lifestyle programs. With this inspiration to renew a passion for communication supports for a new generation of support workers, the Communication Champions program was born.

The program began by welcoming applications from interested support workers. One champion was selected at every service. Within the first 3 months, each champion was trained in Key Word Sign, Talking Mats and communication styles and strategies. After training, champions met with a speech pathologist to discuss goals and areas of support needed for their service. One day per fortnight was then allocated to champions to spend on promoting and implementing communication supports at their service.

Given that the communication styles of participants, staff training and awareness, and existing communication supports varied from service to service, each champion chose a different goal as a starting point to support their service. For some, the first task was to refresh personal communication dictionaries, others renewed consistent use of Key Word Signs, or began modeling the use of aids that were already in place. At some sites, simply normalizing the presence of communication aids within programs and beginning consistent discussion about communication support was the starting point.

Easy access to resources enabled efficient use of champion time. A Microsoft Teams (MS Teams) channel was established, that contained downloadable templates and information about communication supports. Each service was allocated a license Tools2Talk Now, and Key Word

Sign Create to enable quick and easy creation of aids. Additional masterclasses were offered throughout the year for champions to enroll in according to the needs of their service and current goals.

Collaboration and connectedness was key to the success of the program. Throughout the process, champions were supported by each other, and by an allocated speech pathologist who was available to discuss strategies or to answer questions. During monthly online check-in sessions on MS Teams, champions celebrated success, asked questions and reported progress. These online forums also connected champions with updated news and opportunities to access resources and training. Between check-in sessions, champions posted news, questions and resources on the MS Teams chat feed. Additionally, the introduction of a 'Champions Challenge', inspired champions to submit an aid or a good news story to be in a running for a prize.

Outcomes of the first year of the program were recorded by collecting personal reports, case studies, and through a pre-post measures survey. Recordings suggest that in the initial year, the program was successful in cementing communication support on the agenda for Day and Lifestyle services. Visitors to services noted increased presence of communication aids, and service management proudly reported the activities of their champions. Connection between champions was evident in supportive discussion threads on the MS Teams channel, and as champions began to arrange visits to each others sites to observe, and be inspired by how their peers had implemented AAC. In the pre-post survey, notable increases were recorded in the self-rating scores regarding ability to change the environment to help customers communicate, and to use strategies to include customers in daily activities.

Based on the evident potential for further growth of this program, additional funding has been allocated to the second year of the program. Improvements include a more formalised goal setting process, and increased opportunities for site visits by a supporting speech pathologist. Champions, service coordination and management alike are proud and supportive of continued efforts to create communication-rich environments for adults with communication support needs to spend their days, and to continue to innovate strategies to embed AAC into the culture of the service.

References:

Johnson, H., West, D., & Solarsh, B. (2010) Social Inclusion–But Are We Communicating?. *STATE DISABILITY POLICY FOR THE NEXT TEN YEARS-WHAT SHOULD IT LOOK LIKE?*, 97.

McConkey, R., & Collins, S. (2010). The role of support staff in promoting the social inclusion of persons with an intellectual disability. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, 54(8), 691-700.