

Empowering Connection: Resources to Boost Inclusive Interactions for Students with Complex Communication Needs

Kathleen Johnston
Madeleine Lock

Short Abstract

This presentation introduces a suite of templates and strategies designed to help students with complex communication needs (CCN) enhance their interactions with teachers and peers. These evidence-based resources provide practical, time-efficient methods for achieving early communication success - key to fostering relationships and promoting inclusion in schools (Kent-Walsh & McNaughton, D, 2005).

Developed in response to the transition of a student with CCN to mainstream high school, this suite of resources utilises storytelling to assist the student and their family to share tailored information about interests, strengths, and needs, opening opportunities for communication success throughout the school. The primary aim is to provide a flexible blueprint that sparks interest and scaffolds meaningful, diverse interactions and involvement throughout the school day. For schools, these templates offer innovative, bite-sized professional development opportunities that increase capability for interaction with easy, actionable strategies.

Kent-Walsh, J., & McNaughton, D. (2005). Communication partner instruction in AAC: Present practices and future directions. *Augmentative and Alternative Communication*, 21(3), 195-204. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07434610400006646>

Long Abstract

This presentation introduces a suite of evidence-based templates and strategies designed to enhance interactions between students with complex communication needs (CCN) and their teachers, peers, and support staff. These practical resources are aimed at achieving early communication success, which is critical for building relationships and fostering inclusion in schools (Light & McNaughton, 2014).

One of the primary challenges for students with CCN and their support network is ensuring that essential knowledge about their communication needs, strengths, and interests is transferred to and understood by the school community. Developed in response to the transition of a student with CCN to mainstream high school, these resources offer easy-to-implement strategies that facilitate early communication success by building confidence, capacity, and inclusion among students, teachers, and peers (Kent-Walsh & McNaughton, 2005).

Storytelling is an effective way to create interest and establish a solid foundation for meaningful engagement throughout the school day. The templates leverage this and help students and their families share personalised and targeted information about their needs, strengths, and strategies for inclusion. They also incorporate opportunities for co-design, placing the student's voice at the centre of how information is shared, an important feature for strengthening the student's capacity for self-advocacy, personal agency, and deeper engagement (Sheldon, 2016). Care has also been taken to help users blend personal narratives with essential information to set a benchmark for inclusion and focus on building connections even before introducing more specific AAC and communication partner training (Kent-Walsh & McNaughton, 2005; Light & McNaughton, 2014).

For schools, the resources offer manageable professional development opportunities that help educators engage more effectively with students who use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) (Ronski & Sevcik, 2019). Research consistently shows that when students with CCN are genuinely known and understood, their safety and inclusion significantly improve (Sheldon, 2016). These templates thus serve as a starting point for fostering inclusive environments where each student's unique abilities are recognised and celebrated.

Though developed to address the specific needs of a transitioning student, the resources provide a scalable framework for promoting inclusion. They enable schools to build capacity among educators and foster meaningful interactions between students with CCN and the broader school community. By centering on student voice and collaboration, these tools ensure that students with CCN are active participants in their educational journey, building capacity for long-term success and inclusion.

References

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