

Parent and Therapist Partnerships in AAC: Sustaining Success as Children Become Teenagers

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Short Abstract

As AAC users transition into adolescence, the dynamics of support, communication, and therapy evolve. This presentation highlights the long-term partnership between Laura Greene, the parent of two teenagers with Angelman Syndrome who use AAC, and Gemma Holleran, their speech pathologist. It explores how their collaborative efforts have shifted from building core vocabulary and engagement in childhood to embedding AAC into daily routines such as unpacking school bags, getting snacks, and participating in community activities like gym visits.

A key focus of the presentation will be the critical role of training and upskilling disability support workers as children mature. As Sophie and Theo's communication needs have evolved, so too has the support network around them. Gemma and Laura have utilised video-based training tools to ensure support workers are well-equipped to provide consistent AAC support, allowing the teenagers to maintain and enhance their communication skills.

In addition, the presentation will showcase practical strategies, such as the use of an innovative car mount for AAC devices, which has helped reduce behaviours of concern during car travel. Attendees will leave with actionable insights into fostering strong parent-therapist partnerships, empowering support teams, and sustaining communication success through adolescence.

Long Abstract

Gemma Holleran, a speech pathologist, and Laura Greene, the parent of two teenagers with Angelman Syndrome who use AAC, reflect on their evolving partnership and its pivotal role in maintaining communication success as the children transition into adolescence. This presentation builds upon their previous story shared at AGOSCI 2017, providing an in-depth update on how therapy and communication strategies have adapted to the changing needs of Laura's children, Sophie and Theo, as they grow older (Batorowicz, 2024).

In 2017, Gemma and Laura focused on building a comprehensive communication toolbox for Sophie and Theo. Therapy sessions concentrated on core vocabulary development, joint engagement, and enhancing their linguistic skills. Now, in 2025, after navigating the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and telehealth sessions, their approach has evolved to address the complex needs of teenagers.

During the pandemic, Gemma and Laura maintained progress through telehealth, utilising creative strategies such as virtual playdough making, scavenger hunts, and YouTube videos to keep Sophie and Theo engaged. This period highlighted the importance of flexibility and the power of maintaining connection even in challenging circumstances.

As Sophie and Theo have entered adolescence, therapy sessions have shifted focus. Rather than concentrating solely on language development, communication is now embedded in their daily routines—such as unpacking school bags, getting snacks, and engaging in leisure activities like iPad use, art, and trips to the gym. Other areas of communication competence have been a focus, including independent control of device volume and device charging. (Light, 2014). Gemma and Laura have collaborated on creating low-tech communication boards tailored to specific contexts, such as a gym communication board, to ensure the children can actively participate in their routines. Children with Angelman Syndrome are multi-modal communicators (Pearson, et al).

Children and adults with Angelman Syndrome often present with behaviours of concern. A significant challenge the family faced was during car travel, which had long been a source of stress. Sophie and Theo struggled to communicate in the car, leading to frustration and misunderstandings. In response, they developed an innovative car mount for their communication devices, allowing the children to communicate more effectively while traveling. Laura will discuss the process of designing and implementing this solution alongside SOLVE and why it has been such a successful tool for fostering smoother communication on the go.

A key focus of this presentation is the increasing importance of training and upskilling the support worker team around AAC users as they grow older. Sophie and Theo's growing independence and evolving communication has required a consistent and informed AAC approach (McNaughton, 2019). Gemma and Laura have been able to empower disability support workers to provide effective AAC support, with less reliance on one key communication partner. They will share how they've utilised video-based training resources to onboard new support workers to ensure that every member of the team is equipped to facilitate meaningful communication.

Gemma and Laura will also share practical tips for adding phrase-based communication to high tech AAC devices to support emotional regulation. Communication and language evolve as children get older, and it is no different for AAC users.

This session offers attendees practical strategies for strengthening parent-therapist partnerships and creating sustainable support networks as AAC users transition into adolescence. By focusing on equipping both families and disability support workers with the skills they need, the presentation will provide actionable insights into sustaining communication success throughout the teenage years and beyond.

References:

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