

Dear Speechies...Lessons from Parents' Lived Experiences

Jenna O'Brien¹

Kylie Barsby¹ and Amanda Lott

¹ Talk My Talk

Short Abstract

Families play a crucial role in the lives of children who use Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC), making family-centred support a cornerstone of effective AAC service delivery (Biggs et al., 2024; Dunst, 2002). This presentation explores the lived experiences of two parents navigating AAC within their diverse family contexts, highlighting the complex emotional landscape and practical challenges they face. Both parents support multimodal communicators, who access communication in different ways. Through these journeys, we examine feelings of judgment, guilt, joy, and excitement, and discuss barriers and facilitators to collaboration and AAC implementation.

The presenters argue that understanding AAC "buy-in" should not be viewed as mere compliance but as a personal choice shaped by competing demands (Doak, 2021). Clinicians must appreciate the multifaceted pressures on families of children with complex communication needs and balance this understanding with their professional goals. Enhancing AAC outcomes requires recognising the significant time, energy, and resources parents invest in supporting their child's communication development (Laubscher et al., 2024).

This presentation aims to amplify parent voices, offering speech pathologists practical strategies for effective collaboration and deeper insights into the real-life dynamics of AAC use. Ultimately, a more nuanced understanding of family experiences can lead to improved support and outcomes for children using AAC (Coburn et al., 2021; Mandak et al., 2017; Laubscher et al., 2024).

Long Abstract

Many people play important roles in a child's life, but none are more significant than their family, especially for children and young people who use AAC (Biggs et al., 2024). Communication and AAC supports profoundly impact young people, their parents/carers/guardians, and the entire family. Family-centred supports in AAC are considered best practice as they address child and family priorities, build partnerships with families, collaborate in individualised ways, and aim to achieve optimal outcomes for children, parents, and families (Dunst, 2002). Advancing our knowledge and understanding of how to centre the family within AAC service delivery is crucial (Coburn et al., 2021; Mandak et al., 2017).

This presentation delves into the lived experiences of parents navigating the complex landscape of AAC within the context of their busy, but beautiful, multifaceted lives. It situates two parent

journeys in AAC: one from a parent of an emergent eye-gaze AAC user and one from a parent of an intermediate direct touch access user. The presenters will openly and honestly explore their feelings of judgment, guilt, joy, and excitement, and share their barriers and facilitators to effective collaboration and implementation of AAC strategies. These feelings showcase the immense value they place on communication and AAC supports for their children and their future.

The presenters challenge the conventional understanding of AAC "buy-in" by clinicians, framing it instead as a matter of personal choice to be understood within the context of competing demands. Doak (2021) proposed a model that highlights the complexities families face when implementing AAC, considering the myriad pressures on families of children with complex communication needs. Clinicians must grasp these intricacies and balance them with their own frustrations and motivations to effectively support AAC use.

Parents devote enormous amounts of time, energy, and other resources to ensure the best life and outcomes for their child and their family. Often, supporting their child requires them to make substantial sacrifices and take on numerous roles and responsibilities. Given, the crucial role of supportive interactions in early language development and the need to seamlessly integrate AAC into these interactions within the home to maximise participation and learning, there is an urgent need to better understand parent experiences around communication and AAC (Laubscher et al., 2024). In fact, parents express a desire and need for more from their speech pathology and AAC services, advocating for a deeper understanding of their perspectives (Laubscher et al., 2024).

Amplifying parents' experiences, both challenges and successes, can provide important insights into the process of implementing AAC in everyday life (Laubscher et al., 2024). Speech pathologists will come away with practical takeaways, including strategies for effective collaboration with parents and insights into the real-life challenges and successes families face in their AAC journey. This enriched understanding will ultimately enhance their ability to improve AAC outcomes for children with communication challenges (Laubscher et al., 2024; Biggs et al., 2024).