

What is family centred practice really?

Jenna O'Brien¹
Kylie Barsby¹
¹ Talk My Talk

Short Abstract

Family plays a crucial role in the lives of children using Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC), highlighting the importance of family-centred practices (FCP) in speech pathology (Biggs et al., 2024; Coburn et al., 2021). Despite progress towards FCP, a gap persists between recommended practices and family expectations, often leading to suboptimal outcomes (Garcia-Ventura et al., 2020). Effective FCP involves both relational practices, such as building trust and understanding family values, and participatory practices, where families actively engage in decision-making and collaboration (Dunst, 2002; Foster et al., 2019).

A workshop featuring a parent, and a speech-language pathologist (SLP) explores FCP through several key themes, emphasizing empathy and understanding in practice. The first theme addresses the emotional complexity of initial AAC conversations, urging SLPs to approach these discussions with sensitivity (Moorcroft et al., 2020). The second theme challenges the concept of “buy-in” from families, advocating for genuine dialogue that respects the complexities of family life and communication (Doak, 2021; Laubscher et al., 2024; Smidt & Pebdani, 2023).

Goal setting is the third theme, acknowledging the emotional impact on families and stressing the importance of a supportive, collaborative approach (Laubscher et al., 2024). Finally, integrating family-centred values into documentation is highlighted as a way to honour family perspectives.

The workshop aims to enhance the professional development of speech pathologists by providing practical strategies to strengthen family-professional partnerships, ultimately leading to more effective and meaningful AAC outcomes. Emphasising family perspectives is essential for truly family-centred care, fostering a more empathetic and effective intervention process.

Long Abstract

In the lives of children, particularly those using Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC), family plays an unparalleled role (Biggs et al., 2024). Despite significant strides towards family-centred practices (FCP) over the past decade, current literature and the experiences families are sharing underscores a persistent gap between actual practices and family expectations (Garcia-Ventura et al., 2020; Foster et al., 2019). This mismatch can lead to a range of suboptimal experiences and outcomes.

The evolving definition of FCP reflects the dynamic interactions among stakeholders, aiming to identify and implement best practices. Core components of FCP, such as relational practices, emphasise the importance of building strong, trusting relationships between families and clinicians. These relationships enable professionals to gain deep insights into the values, routines, and priorities of AAC users and their families (Dunst, 2002). However, relational skills alone are insufficient to fully embody FCP principles. Participatory practices, which involve families actively in decision-making and AAC intervention implementation, are crucial. These practices are often harder to implement but are crucial to enhance the quality of supports provided (Foster et al., 2019; Dunst, 2002).

In this workshop, a parent and a speech-language pathologist (SLP) share their insights on FCP and AAC, drawing from their personal experiences, the experiences of others who attend their training programs, and current literature. Training is identified as a crucial method to bridge the gap between recommendations and implementation (Garcia-Ventura, 2020), enabling practitioners to progressively adopt a more family-centred approach. This collaborative presentation delves into both relational and participatory practices through several key stages and actions of speech pathology services, including initial AAC conversations, understanding family "buy-in," setting goals, and integrating family-centred values into documentation.

The first theme to be explored focuses on the initial conversations a speech pathologist may have with a family member about AAC. Often, these conversations are charged with emotion, as families may feel a mix of hope, anxiety, and even grief about the need for AAC (Moorcroft et al., 2020). It's crucial for speech pathologists to approach these discussions with empathy and sensitivity and reflect on their own emotions and biases within the process.

The second theme explores understanding "buy in" from the perspective of parents. Doak (2021) purports that families can be positioned as problematic, or reluctant to implement AAC within the home environment due to their supposed lack of enthusiasm. Flemming et al., 2011 confirms this, stating that practitioners often associate lack of family involvement with factors related to family willingness. Whereas parents want communication and AAC experiences to be understood within the context of complex, busy lives, and the intimate ways in which they understand and communicate with their children (Laubscher et al., 2024). The presenters challenge the concept of "buy in" from a true family centred lens as an important starting point for genuine dialogue (Mandek et al., 2017; Smidt & Pebdani, 2023).

The third theme explores goal setting with family members, recognising that the word "goal" can be a triggering concept for families. For many, the process of exploring what is meaningful for them, can evoke a range of emotions, from hope and determination to anxiety and fear of unmet expectations. Families may feel overwhelmed by the pressure to achieve certain milestones or may be reminded of past struggles and disappointments (Laubscher et al., 2024). Understanding this emotional complexity, speech pathologists must approach this process in a way that works best for families.

The final theme explores the way family-centred values can be carried through to note taking and report writing. Integrating family-centred values into documentation ensures that the family's perspectives, concerns, and priorities are consistently acknowledged and respected. Such practice not only fosters transparency but also enhances communication between all parties involved. It ensures that reports and notes are not merely clinical documents but also tools that resonate with the family's experiences and insights. This approach ultimately

strengthens the partnership between families and professionals, promoting a more effective and empathetic AAC intervention.

This workshop amplifies the voice of a parent within the AAC community, highlighting the crucial importance of incorporating family perspectives into practice. The insights gained from this workshop will enhance the professional development of speech pathologists, guiding them towards truly family-centred care. Provision of family-centred services is critical to successful AAC (Laubscher et al., 2024). Attendees will leave with practical strategies to strengthen family-professional partnerships, ultimately leading to more effective and meaningful outcomes.

Biggs, E. E., Therrien, M. C. S., Abarca, D., Romano, M., Barton-Hulsey, A., & Collins, S. C. (2024). Examining the Family-Centeredness of Speech-Language Pathologists Working With Children Who Use Augmentative and Alternative Communication. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 33(2), 1021–1039.

Doak, L. (2021). Rethinking family (dis)engagement with augmentative & alternative communication. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 21(3), 198–210.

Dunst, C. J. (2002). Family-centred Practices: Birth Through High School. *The Journal of Special Education*, 36(3), 141-149.

Foster, T. D., Decker, K. B., Vaterlaus, J. M., & Belleville, A. (2020). How early intervention practitioners describe family-centred practice: A collective broadening of the definition. *Child: Care, Health & Development*, 46(3), 268–274. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cch.12749>

García, V. S., Mas, J. M., Balcells, B. A., & Giné, C. (2021). Family-centred early intervention: Comparing practitioners' actual and desired practices. *Child: Care, Health & Development*, 47(2), 218–227.

Laubscher, E., Pope, L., & Light, J. (2024). “You Just Want to Be Able to Communicate With Your Child”: Parents' Perspectives on Communication and AAC Use for Beginning Communicators on the Autism Spectrum. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 33(2), 716–735.

Mandak, K., O'Neill, T., Light, J., & Fosco, G. M. (2017). Bridging the gap from values to actions: A family systems framework for family-centred AAC services. *Augmentative and Alternative Communication*, 33(1), 32–41. doi:10.1080/07434618.2016.1271453

Moorcroft, A., Scarinci, N., & Meyer, C. (2021). “I've had a love-hate, I mean mostly hate relationship with these PODD books”: parent perceptions of how they and their child contributed to AAC rejection and abandonment. *Disability & Rehabilitation: Assistive Technology*, 16(1), 72–82.

Smidt, A., & Pebdani, R. N. (2023). Rethinking device abandonment: a capability approach focused model. *AUGMENTATIVE AND ALTERNATIVE COMMUNICATION*, 39(3), 198–206.