

Spontaneous use of speech later in life: The potential impact of supported decision making, access to robust AAC, and meaningful community relationships.

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Short Abstract

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This presentation follows the journey of 'John' through his participation in a supported decision-making project, exploring and beginning to use robust augmentative and alternative communication (AAC), and forging relationships with community members. During this time, he received person-centred support provided by long-term and trusted support workers.

Throughout this journey, John began to spontaneously use an increased amount of speech as part of his multi-modal communication (with a significant change happening over the course of a few weeks). John has also begun to say no, and to express his ideas and opinions with new people. This presentation poses a series of clinical questions and considerations, relating to how John's communication may have been impacted and supported by various factors throughout his communication journey.

Long Abstract

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how John's communication may have been impacted and supported by various factors throughout his communication journey.

Could:

- The use of a supported decision making framework by decision supporters
- The introduction of a robust AAC system
- The development of meaningful community relationships facilitated by a long-term and trusted support worker, providing person-centred support

have resulted in significant, clinically observable changes to John's communication.

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Key points:

This presentation will highlight the following key points related to John's multi-modal communication, including his use of AAC. Many of these elements are interconnected.

Supported Decision-Making (SDM) frameworks.

Through John's participation in a supported decision making project, he and his supporters used the WAIS supported decision making guide and recourses. John's decisions, including every day decisions were heard, documented and acted upon by his supporters. A range of supported decision making frameworks exist, for example, the La Trobe Support for Decision Making Practice Framework. This project was led by Professor Christine Bigby and Professor Jacinta Douglas (2019).

This presentation also considers the research of Dr. Jo Watson and Dr. Michelle Browning.

John was supported to learn about and make decisions in many different ways, and in many different environments. He used multimodal communication in these decision conversations. Following the use of the framework in everyday decisions, John was supported to make decisions about what he would like his future housing to look like. John recorded detailed preferences and his supporters worked to act on these.

John was supported through a big life transition, moving out of his family home and into supported independent living. During the implementation of this framework, John began to use language for an increasing range of communication functions, including expressing an idea or an opinion.

In April 2023, the NDIS released the NDIS Supported Decision Making Policy Summary. This policy references the Australian Law Reform Commission (ALRC) recommended Four Decision Making Principles.

Building robust, meaningful, and long-term relationships with community members, and accessing person-centred support.

When John began working with his support worker 'Kelly' he began to build relationships and important routines within his community. John and Kelly took pictures of places and people and printed them out together. Through this, John began to access story telling and reminiscing. He began to experience connection with an increased range of people, and he began to speak with them regularly.

Kelly provided John with person-centred support, and in their time together, they explored meaningful activities for John related to his preferences. This work appeared to be consistent with the conceptual framework for Active Support. Then, John began using speech to greet his important people, or to ask them about their days.

Accessing robust AAC.

John began to explore robust AAC initially through the supported decision making project, before he began working with his own therapist in 1:1 sessions. As a key element of the WAIS framework is related to communication, John's communication was heard and shared with others through the use of a communication passport and other supporting resources.

Prior to exploring AAC, John used multi-modal communication with a combination of some speech, facial expression, body language and gesture. However, it was challenging for him to say no or reject an idea, or to share an opinion or idea, especially to a new or unfamiliar person.

AAC was consistently accessible during decision making moments and conversations, and John was invited to trial and explore different AAC options. He would go on to own an AAC device, an iPad with Proloquo2Go.

A research review completed by Millar, Light and Schlosser (2006) found evidence to suggest that the introduction of AAC will not inhibit speech development, and found some initial evidence to suggest that it may support speech development. This appears to be consistent with John's experience of using both AAC and speech as part of his multi-modal communication.

The possible impact of SDM, community involvement and relationship building, and AAC on John's multi-modal communication.

During John's journey, there was a significant change in his communication. John began using significantly more speech and a noticeable increase (by a number of John's regular communication partners) took place over a period of 2 weeks. There was also a significant change in the way that John was using language, he began to say no, often and clearly, and he started to express new ideas and opinions.

This presentation will consider the possible impact that the above key points may have had in relation to this change in John's multi-modal communication.

References

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- Bigby, C., Douglas, J., & Vassallo, S. (2019). The La Trobe Support for Decision Making Practice Framework. An online learning resource.
- Millar, D. C., Light, J. C., & Schlosser, R. W. (2006). The impact of augmentative and alternative communication interventions on the speech production of individuals with developmental disabilities: A research review. *Augmentative and Alternative Communication*, 22(3), 195-210. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07434610600>
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