

Building the skills of communication partners

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Short Abstract

Mel S is a mentor, an educator and an artist, and she has cerebral palsy and uses AAC. Mel R is a speech pathologist with many years experience supporting individuals who use AAC. In this paper, Mel and Mel will emphasise the importance of the role of the AAC partnership. They will explore the importance of supporting and developing the skills of the communication partners. Mel and Mel have observed that many interventionists focus on what AAC users can or cannot do, without consideration of what those around them are doing. What we can do to make a better balance is provide sufficient education and training to those willing to commit to the AAC role. We all have a responsibility to make space for AAC users to join the conversation. Especially this conversation: what we can and should all be doing to be better communication partners.

Long Abstract

Mel S is a mentor, an educator and an artist, and she has cerebral palsy and uses AAC. Mel R is a speech pathologist with many years experience supporting individuals who use AAC.

What makes a good AAC partner? As an individual with Cerebral Palsy, I have worked closely with my AAC partners for many years. Throughout my journey, I have witnessed how different support workers interact with me and other individuals with different disabilities. In writing this paper, I want to reflect on my personal experience with my AAC partners, as well as encourage individuals to be more open in their approach as an AAC partner. This idea sparked from a conversation with Mel R that enabled open discussion about what approaches can be taken to improve overall communication. Mel R and I were very open and honest with each other, critiquing situations we have witnessed and experienced. The conversation flowed so naturally that the ideas became very organic and beautiful.

One of the key communication groups in my life is the adult chat group that I co-facilitate at CPEC (Melbourne). My role is specifically mentoring yet there are crossovers with being part of the conversation. Many young adults in chat group do not have the opportunity to utilise their communication devices in real life situations. Unfortunately, individuals with disabilities do not always get the opportunity to have their voice heard. Most of the time, people around them assume what they want to say or what they want to do, because it takes them time to express themselves. This is why the key attribute of an effective AAC partner is someone who allows the AAC user enough time to communicate their wants and needs. I love my time at adult chat group because it truly allows all participants to engage in the conversation

throughout their preferred means of communication. Even if it is as simple as adding in a few words to practice small talk or simply have a laugh at what someone else has said, each participant's voice is heard and acknowledged.

What about the communication partners? As a speech pathologist working with children, teens and adults with communication disabilities, my intervention has closely involved developing skills of communication partners. Often I meet an individual and their family, and AAC has 'failed'. When we explore the interventions used to support the AAC user, it has explicitly focused on their skills and not the skills of those around them. When AAC 'fails' practitioners can be quick to say "it's because the individual couldn't" as opposed to reflecting our own intervention as the possible reason for abandonment of aided AAC. Interventions should encourage the AAC users autonomy, be respectful of all the different ways they communicate, and involve skill development of their communities. Being a communication partner is a skill in and of itself, and it's a skill I am still working on. Mel S, along with many of my clients, have taught me more about this than any other resource.

Mel S has been very generous in scaffolding my own skills, giving raw and honest feedback, and openly sharing her experiences with me. Mel S is a confident, articulate and resilient communicator who can shape the actions and behaviours of her communication partners. This isn't always easy or possible for many AAC users. I am learning to listen and observe more, respect all the ways a person communicates, and allow everyone the time to communicate, join in and participate.

In this paper, Mel and Mel will emphasise the importance of the role of the AAC partnership. What we can do to make a better balance is provide sufficient education and training to those willing to commit to the AAC role. We all have a responsibility to make space for AAC users to join the conversation. Especially this conversation: what we can and should all be doing to be better communication partners.