How AAC Brought Us Together – Vocabulary Development and Language Acquisition in Early Family-Child Interaction

At the age of 12 months, my daughter was diagnosed with Wolf Hirschhorn/4p- syndrome. Delayed speech and language development of varying degrees is a prominent feature of 4p- together with severe oral-motor and feeding difficulties(1). Motivated to find ways to communicate with my daughter, I attended shortly thereafter the US conference for families of individuals with 4p- Syndrome. At the conference there was a lot of talk about AAC intervention at as early an age as possible. The most salient "take-home" message for me was that clear boundaries do not exist regarding the communication skills of this population and that the abilities of individuals with 4p- syndrome should not be underestimated (2).

AAC intervention was initiated with my daughter one month later through the use of objects and picture and symbol cards for requesting food and toys as well as a Step by Step for simple interactive communication with her parents and siblings. Right from the beginning she understood the concept of being able to call her sister to give her a kiss and to ask her brother for a lick of his ice cream. At 15 months she began to use a communication device (an iPad with a communication app) with four symbols per page, the number of items being determined by her very limited pointing ability. It was as though AAC was invented for her – she improved her hand skills and her vocabulary quickly expanded – she initiated communication through the use of the communication device throughout the day for requesting, interactive story-reading, and play.

I was constantly online reading research papers, websites and blogs of experts and parents in this field (3), searching for information on developing the language and communication abilities of children her age with the aim of finding the AAC system that would support my daughter's own set of unique needs, strengths and abilities (4). I became convinced that the direction to go with my daughter was through the use of a core vocabulary communication device that would require a minimum amount of navigation from page to page and which would take into account her good motor planning skills while providing her with an extensive and varied vocabulary. I also followed some of the available applications in English (5). The major challenge was that core vocabulary charts have not been developed in Hebrew, either for this age group, or for the iPad, nor was there any research on core vocabulary in Hebrew. This paper will describe the process that I undertook, with the support of my daughter's SLPs, in developing a core vocabulary communication device appropriate for a two year old in Hebrew and the strategies we used with her while making communication fun, engaging and purposeful. Short video clips will illustrate my daughter's amazing use of her communication device for communication and language development, including her use of two and three word utterances, her navigation between categories, her social interactive abilities, and more. With her communication device she can now tell me she wants to go out to swing on the swing, she can tell me who came to her birthday and what she wants to have for lunch, and whether she's feeling tired or happy. The use of AAC has allowed my
nonverbal daughter to be heard and to be fully included and has brought us together as a family.

The authors disclose they have no financial or other interest in objects or entities mentioned in this paper.

References:


(3) Linda Burkhart, Jane Farrall, Janice Light, Gayle Porter, Carole Zangari from PrAACtical AAC (http://praacticalaac.org/)


(5) Center for AAC & Autism, Poloquo2Go and Speak for Yourself.
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