

Social Interaction Project- Informal Review of Findings

Title: "Social Interaction and AAC- Pilot Project"

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Review of Preliminary Results: March 10, 2007

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Research Question: Can AAC users' social interaction improve in complexity and frequency by provision of a conversational template on the users dynamic display devices?"

Skills examined:

1. Frequency of sharing information regarding activities with uninvolved partners
2. Use of conversation starters such as "Guess what!" "Did you hear?" etc.
3. Use of conversation closers such as "Gotta go," "See ya later," and "Goodbye."
4. Frequency of subject initiated conversation with same aged peers
5. Frequency of subject initiated conversation with adult partners
6. Frequency of partner's expectation of communication from subject
7. Average number of conversational turns the subject takes to share information about a particular event.

Subjects: Current AAC dynamic display device users, between the ages of 8-16, who have either one or more of the following disabilities: autism, cerebral palsy, developmental delay, Down Syndrome and other syndromes. Children are all served in the public school system in special education programs.

Methods:

1. Students were randomly selected by respondents to email posting with AAC device manufacturer mailing lists and from all therapy patients at DTA clinics who currently own dynamic display communication devices. All patients whose families expressed a willingness to participate were accepted into the study.
2. Each student was given a news page set for his/her communication device. This page set included a main "my news," "home news" and "school news" pages. "My news" pages consisted of a button to link to "home news," a button to link to "school news" and a button to link to "community news." All pages had additional buttons to link to personal information, and greetings such as "hello" "goodbye" and a regulatory button, "just a minute."
3. Parents were asked to add a few new pieces of information to the "home news" page once a week. Simplified programming instruction specific to the new pages was given to the parents.
4. A member of the student's school IEP team was asked to add a few new pieces of information to the "school news" page once a week as well.

5. The parent and the teacher were asked to help the child use these new pages to share information between home and school.
6. Prior to implementing the use of the news pages, one or more members of the home team (family and friends) and one or more members of the school IEP team were asked to complete an entrance survey to determine the child's current social communication skills.
7. After 8 weeks, the same partners were asked to complete an exit survey including the same original questions, few follow-up questions and a place for comments and suggestions.

Results: Several trends appeared in the follow-up survey responses. Results are, however, only preliminary indications of potential research needs in area of conversations for AAC users. This study was limited by a relatively small number of respondents, variable length of implementation of the page sets and dependence on partner opinion. Page sets and instructions for teams were consistent in design and form for all students.

Positive Improvements after the News Pages were added to students devices :

- *Partners expected students to communicate using their devices more often.*
- *Partners report students to use their devices more frequently without prompting.*
- *Partners report the students to share more pieces of information during conversational exchanges.*
- *Partners report students are more often sharing information with them regarding activities in which partners were NOT involved.*
- *Partner comments were positive about the experience of using the conversation pages.*

No improvement Noted in the Following Areas:

- *Use of conversational starters ("Guess what?", "Did you hear?")*
- *Use of conversational closers ("That's about it." "Gotta go.")*
- *Initiation of conversation with adults and peers*

Questions for Further Investigation:

- Can we standardize the way communication skills are introduced to AAC users?
- Is intervention failure related to the complexity of the page sets and devices AAC users bring to their teams? Can more positive outcomes be gained by simplifying the page sets and directions for use for the AAC user's team?
- Does the visual representation of language available on AAC devices help children with autism learn conversational turn-taking?
- Can children with moderate-severe impairments recognize familiar versus unfamiliar partners and select appropriate page sets for conversation?
- Partner questioning to initiate and maintain conversational interaction
- Given a longer trial period, can students with expressive language impairment learn to use conversational starters and closers?