

TALK WITH ME

By Jackie Kruzic

The word talk is widely interpreted as verbal communication, yet at the time of this publication there are approximately 4 million Americans that are unable to communicate using natural speech (Beukelman and Mirenda, 2013). These individuals rely on other forms of communication known as AAC, Augmentative and Alternative Communication. While technology allows nonverbal individuals to talk with assistive devices there is no assurance they will be heard. This deficit in communication is not due to the lack of ability to engage in conversation, but the lack of others to listen.

My Story

As a children's librarian I often visit neighboring libraries to experience other storytime programs and gain ideas to implement in my library. As a mother of nonverbal child these visits are often filled with anxiety and fear that my daughter will meet rejection, or worse, be ignored. One visit in particular sticks out in my mind.

I check the strap attached to my daughter iPad to ensure it is securely in place before taking her hand and walking into the library. My daughter is excited to go to the "big" library for storytime. We are greeted by a pleasant librarian with an infectious smile and a colorful dress. She bends down to meet my daughter's wondering gaze.

"Hello! What is your name?" she asks.

Silence. The librarian smiles patiently and glances in my direction.

“Tell her your name.” I urge and point to the tablet attached to the strap that is draped across her chest.

My daughter quickly enters the code to unlock the tablet. The librarian waves to another child. My daughter taps an icon. The librarian greets another child. A computer-generated voice emanates from the tablet, My name is Gracie. But the librarian doesn't hear. She has moved on. I smile at my daughter and whisper “Good job.” Even though the librarian didn't hear her response, I want her to know that I did. Her words are important, and they deserve to be recognized.

What Everyone Needs to Know

When Gracie was nine months old my husband and I became deeply concerned about her cognitive development. As the parents of four older children, we were well versed in childhood milestones and Gracie had missed too many ignore. Two years and several evaluations later we were given a diagnosis. Autism. We were advised to seek speech and other forms of therapy to help enhance her skills and aid her development. Over the years some therapies have proved more helpful than others. She has excelled in many areas, yet speech has continued to prove acutely difficult.

When she was seven her speech pathologist recommended aided Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC). That is quite a mouthful, and ironic considering it is intended to be used by a someone who cannot speak. So, what exactly is it? AAC modalities are alternative ways a person may communicate. Such ways include, though are not limited to, gestures, sounds, written communication, pictures, photographs, body language, sign language, communication boards, and speech generating tech devices.

There are various forms of communication. We write, text, employ the use of emojis and memes, we talk with our hands, gesture, point, roll our eyes, and use other various forms of body language. All of these are examples of unaided AAC. To put it simply, we all use alternate communication to enhance our verbal communication. However, not all of us are capable of verbal communication.

Individuals unable to express their needs verbally rely solely on aided AAC to ensure their message is clear and comprehensive. This means they employ the use of an external device to communicate, such as a tablet as in my daughter's case. Understanding the difference in unaided and aided AAC is imperative to meeting the communication needs of those who enter your library seeking assistance.

Now that I have given the blanket definition of unaided and aided AAC, I will say that I cannot share experiences or give examples for all communication modalities. I can only share my experience with speech-generating tech devices as an aided AAC modality. Thanks to modern technological advancements, today's AAC tech assists are often easy to obtain. Electronic handheld devices such as tablets and cell phones can be found at several retail locations or ordered online, and Apps for these devices can be purchased and customized to meet the users' specific needs, including a customized voice that is age and gender appropriate for the user. For my daughter we chose to purchase a small tablet and dedicate it as her "talker", a common term used to describe a personal AAC device. Our daughter's device is dedicated as a talker and not used for other activities. For others, their talker may be a cellphone, laptop, or other multi use device.

There are several communication apps available for purchase through all major mobile app providers. Our daughter uses Proloquo2Go, a symbol based AAC application. We chose this program because it provides hundreds of symbols and pictures in conjunction with letters and numbers to enrich communication. Gracie is still young and learning how to read and spell, the use of symbols and pictures fit her current needs while the letters and numbers will be available as her vocabulary and spelling abilities grow. This program also allows us to create complete sentences for common phrases. We created an icon that says “My name is Gracie” so she could quickly answer this frequently asked question with the touch of a single button. Though her form of communication is different from others, her desire and need to communicate is the same.

What Librarians Need to Know

As librarians we understand the importance of access to information for all and we provide that through various forms of communication. Librarians encounter numerous verbal interactions within a regular workday. Some interactions are small. For example, you may say “thank you” when someone holds open a door allowing you to pass through with your book cart. Other interactions are long. You may spend several minutes probing for more information when a patron asks for the title of that book they remember hearing about with a man and a goat who take a long journey and they think the cover might be orange or maybe yellow but they can’t remember and they are positive you have the title filed away in your mental card catalog. Chances are most of your daily interactions are verbal. You use your voice to fulfill your communication needs. Simply put, communication needs refer to the need to exchange information and as librarians exchanging information is what we do best.

Think back to that small interaction, the one where you said “thank you” to the person holding open the door. Only this time imagine you are the one holding the door. You spot a patron hugging an arm load of books struggling to enter the library. You kindly get up and open the door so they can pass through. You smile and say “hello.” There is no reply. No, “hello.” No, “thank you.” No acknowledgment of any kind. You didn’t have to open the door, the least they can do is say thank you, right? But is it really the least they can do? For someone who struggles with verbal communication a simple “hello” or “thank you” may be *more* than they can do.

I am ashamed to admit that at one point I would have been irritated by a person’s lack of acknowledgement to my helpful gesture. My attitude changed when my daughter was diagnosed with autism. It was then that I realized verbal communication is a gift. Those who struggle to form words and construct sentences deserve patience, attention, respect, and support. It is important for librarians to extend each of these things to patrons with communication issues.

Many of us may work in libraries where sensitivity and inclusivity trainings are required. I applaud those who take these trainings seriously. Nothing hurts my heart more than watching my daughter be brushed aside by someone who does not know how to communicate with her. Conversely nothing warms my heart more than seeing her treated with patience and understanding. Yet even with sensitivity and inclusivity training there will remain a level of discomfort when interacting with a patron who cannot speak. When considering the service I wish my child would receive I came up with a 4-step approach I call The PASS Approach.

The PASS Approach

Step 1: Patience

When my daughter began using her talker our speech therapist incorporated her device into every session. At first the focus was to help her learn how to navigate the communication board. Now that she has mastered navigating the program her sessions focus more on the speed at which she is able to access symbols and form sentences. However even with practice and daily use, speaking with a talker is not a quick conversation.

Patience is paramount when assisting a patron who uses a speech generating tech device. While the program is user friendly and simple enough for a young child to navigate, it still takes time to press separate buttons and compose a sentence. Talkers are designed to announce each symbol that is pressed. The user must then press a “go” button before each selected item is read consecutively as a sentence. Simply put, you will hear the sentence twice. Once as they select each symbol, and again when they hit go. For example, How. Are. You. Today. How are you today? Remember to wait for them to hit go before responding.

An AAC program such as the one my daughter uses, allows only one sentence to be created at a time. Even if the patron has prepared a sentence so they can simply press “go” to have it read aloud, they will still need time to compose another sentence should they require further assistance.

It can take 45 to 60 seconds for my daughter to find the symbol she needs, press it, find the next symbol, press it, then press go. That was a tedious sentence. Yet to an AAC user they have created a sentence that is concise and to the point at only six words long.

“Where are the dinosaur books please?”

45 seconds may not seem like a long time but try an experiment. Set a timer for 45 seconds. Now sit and wait for the timer to buzz. Do not continue to read, or check your messages, or sip your drink, just sit and wait.

I am going to predict it was a lot longer than you anticipated. You may have found it difficult to sit and do nothing for the entire 45 seconds. Now imagine you are the one trying to complete a task while someone waits.

We have all experienced the anxiety that ensues when the grocery store clerk hands you your change and you quickly try to fit the bills into your wallet but there is one errant dollar that refuses to lay flat and the person behind you is inching closer and the clerk is trying to hand you your receipt so you jam the money into the bill slot of your wallet but you forgot there was change in your palm and you hear the CLINK CLINK CLINK of coins hitting the floor and you look down to see two pennies and a dime sprinkled around your feet and you think *it's only twelve cents* so you leave it and hurriedly stuff your bulging wallet, thanks that one crumpled dollar bill, into your purse as you tell the cashier you don't need the receipt then you grab your groceries and hightail it out of there before the customer behind you starts to get agitated!

The patron using a talker is feeling that same level of anxiety as they compose a sentence. They know you are waiting. Be mindful of their anxiety and assure them that you have time to wait and are happy to assist them in any way.

Step 2: Attention

Take my word for it, you will want to multitask while waiting for the patron to compose a sentence on their device. Don't. Remember that 45 second waiting exercise? I did that to

highlight how excruciatingly long you may have to be still while the patron initiates the next part of the conversation. You will want to finish sending that email, continue to unload the book cart, or simply divert your gaze. You will be itching to fill the lag in conversation with an activity. Be aware that doing this will undermine your efforts to put the patron at ease. Your lack of attention will be perceived as impatience, and we already discussed the importance of patience.

My personal tip: observe something about the person you can compliment. That way when they have completed their sentence, you can respond not only to what they have said but also add something to the conversation. “By the way I like your shoes.” Everyone appreciates a compliment, and it will show them that you are fully present.

Giving your full attention may seem like basic advice. After all it is our job to provide all library users with quality service. Yet on average, interactions with patrons are fast paced. You answer a question, direct a patron to their desired book’s location, assist with a computer issue, or engage in pleasant easy banter while checking out books. All of which are completed in a matter of moments. An interaction with a patron who uses a talker will take longer than average. Knowing and accepting that from the beginning will help all library staff provide the proper level of attention to ensure the patron is able to access what they need.

Step 3: Speak (Normally)

Requiring the use of a talker does not mean cognitive impairment, hearing impairment, or lack of awareness. The subconscious desire to speak loudly or with a condescending tone is all too real. I cringe when people speak to my daughter in a “baby voice”, or worse, when they don’t speak to her at all but address me instead. She cannot speak but she is intelligent and aware.

Many people who use a talker will have a caregiver or aide who accompanies them on outings. There are numerous reasons for this, but the use of an aide does not mean the person using the ACC device is incapable of having a one-on-one conversation. When they use their device to address you, address them back. Be patient, give them your full attention, and keep in mind they will pick up on your tone, your body language, and your capability to address them as an equal. If it is necessary to address the caregiver for clarification, immediately return your attention back to the person operating the talker. Do not cut them out of the conversation by addressing only the caregiver. Most important, never speak about the patron to their caregiver as if they are not present.

Step 4: Support

This is the most important step for libraries and librarians. It is imperative that library directors, supervisors, and staff support the use of The PASS Approach. Support must be given not only when interacting with a patron who uses a talker, but also when another staff member is assisting said patron. When you notice a colleague engaged with a talker user, understand that they may be assisting that patron for quite some time. I have been in situations where I was admonished for attending to one patron for too long. I was once told that my job is to direct the patron to what they need and move on. This may be acceptable for many patron interactions, but exceptions must be made for patrons with communication issues. Staff and supervisors should support one another and allow ample time to spend with the patron even if that means a daily task is delayed or not complete.

I implemented the PASS Approach when I became the director of a small rural library. A unique opportunity presented itself that allowed me to provide immersive AAC training to the library staff.

One scorching Texas summer day I received a call from my daughter's speech pathologist. She needed to cancel my daughter's therapy appointment due to a broken air conditioner. The unit in her office was broken and would not be fixed for a couple of days. Anyone who has ever set foot in Texas understands that air conditioning is vital. I had a flash of inspiration and quickly suggested she set up shop in the library conference area until the AC unit was functional. Not only would this prevent my daughter's session from being cancelled but would benefit all her clients who rely on consistent therapeutic practices to maintain their progress.

The therapist loved the idea and presented it to all her clients. She made sure everyone understood that they could cancel their sessions if they were uncomfortable using a conference room that was visible to the general public. Not a single client cancelled. For three days the library saw many new faces enter for therapy and leave with a book. Library staff members were introduced to patrons who used talkers and educated on how to effectively communicate with each of them. The PASS Approach ensured that speech therapy clients who had not visited the library before were met with open arms and encouraged to return. The library was overwhelmed with positive feedback as our new patrons praised us on social media for opening our doors and our hearts to them. It was an incredible experience and showcased the true purpose of libraries; to provide open access to information for all.

What Should Have Happened

Let's rewind and redo the storytime situations from earlier. This incident did not happen at my home library, but at a larger library in a nearby city. Let me be clear that this librarian was kind and welcoming and we enjoyed our time there immensely. Unfortunately, she and the other library staff lacked understanding on how to communicate with an AAC device user. They did not have The PASS Approach knowledge. Had they, this situation could have happened like this:

We enter the storytime area and a pleasant librarian with an infectious smile and a colorful dress bends down to meet my daughter's wondering gaze.

"Hello! What is your name?" she asks.

Silence. The librarian smiles patiently and glances in my direction.

"Tell her your name." I urge and point to the tablet attached to the around her neck.

My daughter quickly enters the code to unlock the tablet. The librarian waves to another child and makes eye contact with a staff member who walks over and begins greeting the arriving children and parents. Gracie taps an icon on her device. The librarian waits patiently. A computer-generated voice emanates from the tablet, My name is Gracie.

"Hello Gracie, I'm glad you are here today. Please find a seat and we will get started."

Storytime begins on time in an inviting atmosphere.

Had the libraian been aware of my daughter's unique communication needs I have no doubt she would have exhibited patience, given her full attention, spoken to my daughter as she would any other young patron, and would have done so confident that another staff member would take over the duty of welcoming each child as they entered the storytime area.

The PASS Approach (Patience, Attention, Speak, Support) needs to be accepted and incorporated into every library. Directors and management should understand the value of training staff to uphold the principles outlined in The PASS Approach. This inclusive and viable approach is designed to aid librarians in providing quality service and access to information to individuals with communication issues. Whether that information is a request, question, idea, or feeling, the ability to express it verbally is precious and not one everyone shares. As librarians we must be mindful of the limitations that challenge our patrons and incorporate The PASS Approach into our daily interactions.

The responsibility to respectfully meet the communication needs of those who enter the library is yours. Fulfill it well.

References

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