

Changing Attitudes

Kate Ellis

My name is Kate Ellis. I would like to tell you about how I was involved in making videos for a training package, compiled by my speech therapist, Joan Murphy. It was designed to let able bodied people and AAC users understand the difference in communication involving both parties. I felt something had to be done about able bodied people's attitude towards people with speech problems. I feel, because I am in a wheelchair and have a communication difficulty, I get looked upon as being both mentally and physically disabled. I am not. I have a mind of my own. I only wish that people would take the time and realise that I am an adult and I think and feel the same way as they do. I'm not talking just for myself – I am sure many people in the same position as myself have experienced this.

Before moving into my own house I stayed at a hostel in Stirling. I found the attitudes of most staff deplorable. For instance, I like to have my *Liberator* available all the time. I found the staff preferred me not to have it at meal times. They thought as I was eating I wouldn't want to talk, so they removed it. But one advantage I do have is that I can hold a conversation and eat a meal at the same time. I also found that I wasn't meant to answer back as this often offended some people and would affect when I would get my *Liberator*, but half the time I didn't get it anyway because the staff were wanting peace and wouldn't take time to listen to me. I don't think they realized how important my *Liberator* is to me. I put this down to the lack of *knowledge* in the community about how to converse with AAC users. I then asked Joan what she thought and we discussed what would be the best way to go about it. I suggested an in service training day. I then selected members of staff who I felt would benefit most from it. I felt we got the message across at the time but to have a more lasting effect on staff this would have to be done on a more regular basis, to get able bodied people to both understand and listen to AAC users.

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Just before I moved into my own house I did another training session at the Speech and Language Therapy Department in Stirling. This involved Joan, myself and my new carers. By this time I found it easier to get the message across. The training video that I was involved in was very helpful because not all my carers had experience with AAC users. The video was able to portray several situations I have so often found myself in like able bodied people talking *about* me and not *to* me when I am present.

In the video it shows I can be more involved in conversation if the company I am in would sit down and were all more or less at eye level. This certainly makes a difference. When you have somebody standing behind you or beside you this can be very intimidating and uncomfortable for the AAC user. Everyone knows their own level of vocabulary, as do I, but I find there is sometimes someone who wants to work my *Liberator* for me. This is my way to converse with people and I don't like anybody else interfering with it, as they could not only make a very costly mistake with it, they could lose me my voice and, because of the position that I am in, I would say it is my most important asset. I am as capable of using my *Liberator* as they are at holding a conversation. The video is very explanatory and I would say in a sense compulsory for able bodied people and AAC users working together.

I also found it very interesting in the training to hear how able bodied people felt about communicating with people like myself. Many feel anxiety and fear. I can understand this but I feel if there was more awareness of this in the community, we would not only be accepted more, but we could also play an active role in educating the public.

I am also involved in helping the Psychology Department at Stirling University with their Research, which I enjoy very much because it gives me a sense of satisfaction. I realise now that there are a great deal of people who are interested in communication. I feel I am more confident within myself now, to start a conversation and to pick up on other conversations. I think being involved in the making of the training package and video, with Joan and everyone else, has helped me.

Kate Ellis
Stirling

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