

AAC in the Community – A Personal Viewpoint

Danny McFadden

The role that communication plays in society literally speaks for itself. All we have to do is look back through the decades and see the wars and troubles that have started through lack of communication. If people had talked, how much trouble could have been avoided?

Today we do not have much of a society but without communication it would just not exist at all, or it would at least be a very boring one.

There are lots of different forms of communication. These are talking, writing, telephone, fax, computer modem and now there is AAC.

In this paper I hope to show my respect for the art of communication. This is something that other people take for granted but I certainly do not. One perfect way to realise how important it is to communicate is to put yourself in the situation that you know what you want to say but you cannot speak. You know that all it would take would be a couple of words and the person facing you would understand perfectly what it is you want.

From a little boy my first memory was one of frustration, frustration with not being understood – and, because I was not understood, being treated differently – treated as if I was not intelligent or worse again treated as if I was stupid. If they think you are stupid they can ignore you, and if you make a fuss then they think that you are troublesome and hard to handle. It was humiliating and unless you have been in a similar situation you cannot understand. Asking for something as simple as a drink or wanting to go to the toilet was a challenge in itself. The introduction of communication aids has literally changed my life as I know it has for others.

I think AAC has been of most help to people in care, whether it is temporary or permanent. You have to understand that for the people caring for them it is probably the first time they have met. This is where AAC comes into practice. You can easily let them know what it is you want, they cannot ignore you or pretend they cannot understand you. All it takes now is a simple command on your communicator and you can let them know what it is you want for example, to go to bed, have a drink, you want to go out or simply your food is too hot. The main point being that you become more independent and you develop your self respect again after so many years of silence.

Now the problem develops that you now have hundreds maybe thousands of people with new opinions, new wants, not willing to sit back and accept what goes on around us but stating opinions about respite centres, the carers and the method of care. So now we ask, “are things changing?” Yes, thankfully they are because, to be honest, they *had* to change – and I mean for the better not for the worse.

These things may not seem like much to you, but to me and others like me being able to communicate puts us into society. It lets us have a voice. As people it is our right to use our new found voice or not to use it. We may say things that people do not want to hear.

For me having a *Liberator* has changed my life completely. Not only has it given me a voice (which some may argue is the worst thing that could have happened), but it has also given me the opportunity to write. I can connect my *Liberator* to a computer and write essays, enter competitions or simply play a game.

Looking back through the development of communication aids it really is quite amazing how fast it has developed. First there was Bliss which really was a major breakthrough. From then, it has been advance after advance at a very fast pace. The good thing is that as something new is developed and used we can turn round and suggest how it could be better and the amazing thing is that we are actually listened to, not ignored.

Sometimes I can honestly say that I sit and wonder what the next new innovation will be because truthfully each new communicator that comes out is far more advanced than the previous one. The only sad thing is the expense to buy the next new innovation. This is where I personally believe that the government should help. There is so little help given to disabled people to better themselves or rather no help at all.

To purchase a new communicator takes thousands of pounds. Now how do they honestly expect us to raise that type of money? Maybe they think we can just roll into a bank and ask for a loan but then they know that we could never in a month of Sundays qualify for a loan, so where do we get the money? Again we rely on charity to help us. That may not seem so bad and yes, eventually we get the communicator but how many

This paper first appeared in Widening the Perspective (1995).

people do not have someone that can help them raise the money so instead of getting something which could change their life for the better, they have to do without?

I think at this juncture the government should step in and give help. People who are deaf are given hearing aids. People with heart problems are given pacemakers. People with communication difficulties are given what? Exactly nothing. Again a problem that is ignored. But ignoring the problem does not mean that it will go away. We haven't before and we certainly will not now.

In summary I would just like to say that the *Liberator* has transformed my life from the poor soul that people felt sorry for to the person that people listen to. My only regret is that we did not have the technology years ago.

*Danny McFadden
Hillington Day Centre
Lorne Road
Glasgow*