

The Power of Finding a Voice and Making Choices

Introduction

Daniel is a student with a diagnosis of Isodicentric 15, a chromosome disorder with features of learning difficulties, autism and developmental delay. This case study explores how Daniel developed his voice through non-verbal communication, enabling him to have a greater say in his life.

Background

Daniel joined Sunfield in 2008, aged 8. His admission paperwork referred to difficulties in communication and noted that he was not able to securely and consistently make a choice between two objects. At the time, his communication skills were assessed as being at about a 6-month level. Later, Daniel's first Annual Education Review at Sunfield assessed him as P1ii in Literacy. He needed a lot of support to participate in activities, and preferred to 'glance' at activities rather than engaging fully. He was also reported to like spending time in his own company, and was considered 'quiet, but happy'.

The Journey

Staff working with Daniel in all settings quickly identified the need to promote Daniel's communication and interaction skills, as well as promoting his independence. There were concerns that his quiet and passive nature would leave him vulnerable and unable to say if he didn't want to do something. Daniel's Speech and Language Therapist began to use Intensive Interaction to develop and promote his social interaction skills. This approach was also utilised in his class and residential house, providing Daniel with a range of opportunities to develop his social skills. Intensive Interaction also promotes giving students control over their communication, and all communications being honoured. This was felt to be of particular importance to Daniel, in developing an understanding of his own communicative power.

Staff also began to support Daniel to communicate his needs and wants through the use of TOBIS (True Object Based Icons) and objects of reference. This was the start of developing Daniel's communication, with the aim of providing him with a 'voice' that he could use clearly and consistently. Daniel also had access to a range of therapies and therapeutic approaches designed to encourage his communication and interaction skills. These included Colour Light Therapy, Music Therapy, Speech and Language Therapy and Occupational Therapy. Daniel's review paperwork in 2011 made reference to increased use of TOBIS, with Daniel beginning to travel to exchange TOBIS for the items he wanted. Of equal importance were the reports of Daniel beginning to push items and activities away if he did not want to participate. This indicated to staff that Daniel was beginning to develop the skills to say 'No' to things, and was starting to be more assertive. The Speech and Language Therapy report stated, "Daniel has matured considerably and is no longer passive".

Daniel continued to make steady progress in all areas of his communication and interaction skills. In 2013 his review reports commented on how he was now able to gain the attention of the adult he was communicating with by tapping them, or standing in front of them and giving eye contact. Daniel also began to use technology as a method of communication (iPads and the computer), which opened up new opportunities for Daniel to use his voice. In 2014, Daniel was assessed at P3ii.6 in Literacy. This is outstanding progress when compared to the National Progression Guidance for students working at P levels, and his development in communication has been exceptional.

The Conclusion

Daniel's confidence in communicating his likes and dislikes continues to grow. This was very much in evidence earlier this year when he participated in a training programme with a group of peers. In a new environment, with a number of unfamiliar people, Daniel was able to effectively and persistently communicate that he did not want to take part, by moving a screen to 'hide' the activity he was being asked to do. This is a far cry from the passive and quiet young man who first entered Sunfield. It is a pleasure to see him now using his voice with confidence.