

Submission to the Senate Inquiry into the prevalence of different types of speech, language and communication disorders and speech pathology services in Australia

I have been a speech pathologist for 35 years. I would like to share two positive stories about the impact of being able to communicate.

The first is about a boy with cerebral palsy who lived in a group home. He had no formal means of communication, although staff said they thought he smiled for "yes" and frowned for "no". Working from that basis we eventually got a communication system into place for this boy who had minimal voluntary movement. His passion was music and the first day he got the hang of using the scanning voice generated device he made me play and change about 20 songs, laughing outrageously every time he was able to make a choice, or make others do what he asked. His laughter stays with me, many years later.

My second story is about an 18 month old boy. His mother brought him for assessment because she knew something was not right. Despite the doctor saying to give it time, she knew he was not communicating as her other children had. The child had a very severe verbal dyspraxia. He could manage to produce only vowel sound. Over 3 and a half years he, his mum and I worked, drilled, played with sounds in a systematic way. By the time he turned 4 he was talking normally. I had to warn his mother that he might struggle with reading and literacy at school. I saw the boy and his mum a few years later in a shopping centre. He spoke like any other second grader. He was doing brilliantly at school. His mum said all the drilling in phonics put him streets ahead. I knew he would have a life like any other child. What a privilege it was to participate in his journey.

Unfortunately I could also tell unhappy, desperate stories about people unable to communicate: About a man who tightened his belt a notch every week. He was starving himself to death because he could not bear not being unable to communicate after stroke (because of aphasia), he received minimal help; About a man who committed suicide after a brain injury which caused massive language problems; about countless marriages torn apart because of disabled children not being able to get the speech pathology and other therapy help needed...

Communication is life and life means communicating.

I choose to focus on the positive and have taken the International
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Year of Communication pledge. <http://www.communication2014.com/get-involved/sign-the-pledge/>

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