Safeguarding Communication for Adults with Communication Disability in Community Programs: The Development of the Communication Toolkit Application

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Short Abstract

Introduction: Environmental barriers have the potential to impact on all individuals with communication disability (Light & McNaughton, 2014). In community programs, potential barriers to communication include unfamiliar and/or untrained staff, and the lack of availability of communication tools. The Communication Toolkit Application (CTA) has been developed to allow information about an individual's communication to be stored securely and accessed efficiently by support workers.

Method: User testing of the CTA was undertaken by individuals with communication disability, support workers and speech pathologists. A range of methods were used to gain feedback on the application, including surveys, a focus group and Talking Mats©.

Results: Individuals with communication disability provided positive feedback overall, but some indicated that the process of adding information took a long time. Support workers reported that the application was easy to use and would be a useful way for new staff to learn how program participants communicate. Speech pathologists highlighted the importance of being able to embed photos and video in the application.

Discussion: Providing information about an individuals' communication is an important strategy in safeguarding communication, however written communication profiles are not always easily accessible for time-poor support staff. The use of a digital platform has been effective in overcoming this key barrier identified by support workers and speech pathologists.

Conclusion: The development of the CTA has been shaped by input from a broad range of stakeholders. The application has the potential to redress potential environmental barriers for individuals with communication disability in adult community programs, and beyond!

Long Abstract

Introduction: Environmental supports and barriers have the potential to impact on all individuals with communication disability to some degree (Light & McNaughton, 2014). However, beginning communicators and individuals with significant intellectual disability are more likely to impacted by environmental barriers (McNaughton & Light, 2013). There are potentially disastrous consequences for individuals with communication disability when communication breakdown occurs and/or communication is not supported in their environment, including increased risk of abuse, neglect, seclusion, and restraint (Koh et

al., 2021; Webber et al., 2017). As such, support for individuals with communication disability must focus more broadly on communication partners and the environment (Light & McNaughton, 2014).

Within community day programs for adults with disability, potential barriers to communication include unfamiliar and/or untrained staff, and the lack of availability of communication tools and supports. Strategies such as written communication profiles and communication passports are useful in providing unfamiliar communication partners with important information about how an individual communicates. However, support staff are often time poor and written information may not always be easily accessible. To address this challenge, and to safeguard communication for individuals with communication disability, The Communication Toolkit Application (CTA) was developed. The CTA allows important information about an individual's communication to be stored securely and accessed efficiently by support workers, while also providing support workers with access to communication tools and supports, and online training modules.

Method: The CTA emerged from a broader safeguarding communication project, which had input from a range of stakeholders, including individuals with communication disability, parents of individuals with communication disability, speech pathologists and researchers. The CTA was developed by Novita's Research and Development team, as well as by biomedical engineering and IT students. The application enables individuals with communication disability to create a profile, which contains important information about their multiple modes of communication, and how staff can support their communication. The application is accessible via a QR code log-in by approved support staff.

User testing of the CTA was undertaken by individuals with communication disability, support workers and speech pathologists. A range of methods were used to gain feedback on the application, including surveys, a focus group, Talking Mats© and rating scales. The CTA was modified based on the feedback provided by all participants.

Results: Individuals with communication disability used a range of modes of communication to provide feedback on the application, including responding to survey questions, completing a Talking Mat©, using rating scales and through the interpretation of body language and vocalisations. Overall, individuals with communication disability provided positive feedback about the application, and agreed it was something they would like to access. Some individuals indicated that the process of adding information to create their profile took a long time.

The support workers provided feedback after a live demonstration and trial of the application. They reported that the application was easy to use and would be a useful way for new staff to learn about how program participants communicate. All the support workers highlighted that having access via mobile technology was very important, as they are often out in the community with participants and written documentation is far less accessible. Speech pathologists also participated in a group discussion following a demonstration of the application. Overall, they thought the application would be useful in supporting the communication of their clients in adult community programs, and highlighted the importance of being able to embed photos and video in the application.

Discussion: Providing information about an individuals' communication, and training regular communication partners, are important strategies in safeguarding communication for individuals with communication disability. However, as identified during consultation with

support workers, written communication profiles are not always easily accessible for time-poor support staff. The use of a digital online platform was seen as an effective solution to overcome this key barrier, and to therefore potentially reduce the incidence of communication breakdown for individuals with communication disability.

A key component of the development of the CTA was seeking input and feedback from individuals with communication disability. During user testing, it was apparent that having a range of communication tools and supports available was critical in supporting individuals with communication disability to provide feedback on the application. The use of adapted materials is considered to a key component of conducting research that is inclusive of individuals with communication disability (Walsh et al., 2024).

Conclusion: The development of the CTA has been shaped by input from a broad range of stakeholders, including individuals with communication disability. The use of digital technology was viewed as an effective solution to overcome potential limitations of written communication profiles. The CTA has the potential to redress potential environmental barriers for individuals with communication disability in adult community programs, and beyond!