

“Assuming a non-verbal child (non-speaking child) has nothing to say, is like assuming someone without a car has nowhere to go”. As a speech-language pathologist, I have highlighted this sentence many times over the last few years. This sentence became even more meaningful to me when I met Jillian. For confidentiality purposes, a pseudonym has been used.

I first met Jillian in January 2022. Jillian is a bright, funny, and autistic 11-year-old girl. As part of her autism, communication with others has been very difficult for her. Jillian spoke only a few words when we first met, and she had great difficulty partaking in everyday interactions we hold for granted, such as greeting a friend, asking for a glass of water, being able to say no, and making a joke. Jillian was frequently dysregulated, overstimulated, uncomfortable and therefore difficult to engage. After a few observations and trying out different communication options, I decided to provide her with an electronic communication system, consisting of a high-frequency word page (core vocabulary) and a large variety of category folders. Jillian was familiar with technology as she had experience using an iPad in class and at home. Jillian took every opportunity to explore her communication system, diving deep into the different category folders, but never ending up on the page we wanted her to be for a specific activity. She frequently seemed stuck on her alphabet page, where she would type the alphabet in order endlessly, while humming the ABC song alongside. This led me to restrict her access to the keyboard, in the hopes I could redirect her to the core vocabulary and category pages of her communication system. A few days later, I noticed that Jillian had located a second keyboard in her system and was typing words we did not realize she knew. She had taught herself to use word prediction and was learning how to write new words, using the word/image buttons in her system. I observed Jillian explore her system and realized how she was expanding her written word knowledge and vocabulary as she explored the core and category pages. Realizing what she was doing, I reinstated her original keyboard and gave her access to all additional communication app features, and this is where the magic began. She quickly taught herself to use recent messages to access earlier thoughts, and she would adapt those phrases as needed. She continued to teach herself how to write new words. She participated in class activities somewhat more actively, often typing answers to questions she expected to get from her teacher ahead of time (e.g. “What is the date today?” or “What is the weather like today?”). Simultaneously, Jillian’s oral language also increased.

Despite the progress in using her device and the great gains in vocabulary, Jillian continued to struggle engaging in reciprocal communication. She was difficult to engage in basic language activities and frequently typed or spoke vocabulary or short phrases about topics that were of specific interest to her, not relating to materials presented to her by the clinician or teacher. Realizing that vocabulary was developing but her use of that vocabulary to communicate with others was not improving, I decided to switch my interventions to fully student-led communication sessions. Jillian from then on decided the topic of the session and the clinician followed. This has allowed us to target basic language functions like taking turns in conversation, waiting for the communication partner to finish a thought, and being perceptive to questions a communication partner may pose. With this approach and constant access to her communication device, Jillian’s communication skills continue to develop both in the area of vocabulary and sentence structure, but also in the area of social use of language.

Jillian has materialized the phrase “assume competence”, or a phrase I may even like better “assume potential”. It has been such a wonderful experience getting to know Jillian beyond the little dysregulated girl I met in January 2022. I know we still have a long way to go, but I cannot wait to see where Jillian’s communication journey will take her.

Exploring alternative ways of communication for autistic individuals can be so challenging, and at times, it may seem that progress will never come. Not all autistic students will develop language at the pace Jillian does, but even learning a few words on a communication device, on a communication board or via gestures can help develop some independence, decrease frustration and support interactions for autistic people. It requires enormous determination and persistence on both the autistic individual as well as the communication partner’s side. But believe me when I say, that what waits on the other side, is so worth it.

Submitted by a Montreal region Speech-Language Pathologist