

Tuesday, September 19, 2006

## Finding a voice

### Variety of assistive devices enhance communication skills of nonverbal children

By Tiffany Erickson

Deseret Morning News

Twenty years ago, if Nathan Kaplan, 14, had been alive, he wouldn't have been able to tell you what the weather was like. He would have known perfectly well that it was sunny and warm, but as a nonverbal child with autism he wouldn't have been able to say "sunny," as he communicated last week.

He pushed a button on a machine with a number of pre-recorded phrases and words.

"What are you eating, Nathan?" his teacher asked.

The Jordan Valley student pushed a button on a touch screen. "Popcorn," the speakers answer.

Thanks to the device, teachers also learned that he likes green M&Ms, a lot.

The word "more," came from his device a number of times. Then he was done.

"I'm finished," he messaged. And after being asked to answer more questions he hit the "I don't want to" button and then shut off the device. Enough was enough.

In the past three decades, with the help of technology and research about specific disabilities, devices for nonverbal individuals have improved by leaps and bounds.

Speech pathologist Rita Bouillon, who is also the principal at Jordan Valley School, said a multitude of disorders can render a child with no ability to communicate verbally — cerebral palsy, autism, Down syndrome and multiple disabilities.

"Twenty-five years ago these kids would have been considered unteachable and unlearnable," said Bouillon. "There are assumptions made, if they can't say it then they don't understand it, but we know that they understand a whole lot more than we would have thought."

She said years ago most communication for students who were nonverbal was through pictures, motions and behavior. But drawing pictures for each need takes time, and guessing can become frustrating for everyone.

Special education specialists say computer devices like voice output machines, voice synthesizers, language keyboards and even picture exchange communication systems have greatly improved disabled students' communication and access to education.

"If a student throws a fit then they are telling us that they need something. But those behaviors are maladaptive, they don't fit in and they look out of the ordinary when they are out in the real world," Bouillon said. "If they can communicate those things with a device then it makes them fit in better with their peers and their neighborhood community and their family."

Salt Lake residents Donna and Rick Spivey adopted their daughter, Krista, who has autism, from Lithuania when she was a toddler.

Because Krista was nonverbal she would become easily frustrated and act out. Aside from biting and kicking, when she was upset she would hold her breath, turn blue and pass out — sometimes three times a day.

But when she was around 8 years old a speech pathologist introduced her to an augmentative device that could do the talking for her. And Donna said since that time Krista has completely done a 180.

Krista, now a 12-year-old at Eastmont Middle School, has a lot less frustration. Donna said the tantrums are gone, she has friends and she is learning math skills and reading.

"Before, hardly anyone would interact because they just didn't know how and didn't think she understood. But now she goes around after church saying 'Hi, how are you?' and everyone wants to come over and talk to her," Donna said.

"She is doing so well and progressing academically where before it was just dealing with behaviors and putting out fires — that's all we were doing," she said.

Similarly, it was a seventh-grade teacher who introduced Clearfield resident Marie Rasmussen's daughter, Anna, who has cerebral palsy, to a communication device.

"Before our way was to ask questions, 'Do you want this, do you need this, are you hurting?' and she would sign yes or no," Rasmussen said.

But when Anna was in seventh grade, her teacher recognized that Anna was capable of a lot more than some had thought — she could read. Anna would hear a word and then point at the word that was said.

Shortly after making that discovery her teacher helped her get a computer device that gave her a voice and helped her communicate with her family, teachers and peers. But more importantly it is allowing her to learn, Rasmussen said.

Anna, now a sophomore at Layton High, is seldom without her device. She just got a new \$7,000 device that can attach to her wheelchair and output information about friends, school, home, family, needs, wants, food and a lot more. It also has Internet capabilities.

"It's opening up everything for her," Rasmussen said. "She can come home and say, 'Mom, this is what I'm doing,' instead of showing a note that they bring home — it's the greatest thing in the whole world."

The devices can often be a considerable expense. Some families are able to get Medicaid or their insurance to fund them. But there are makes and models for all types of disabilities, and families can access a number of them through the Utah Augmentative Alternative Assistive Communication and Technology Teams (UAAACT).

Through the team, students can get evaluated to determine what kind of assistive communication is most appropriate for that student and the organization can help access the needed devices.

Though technology has been key in communication and learning for those who are nonverbal, Jim West, assistive technology specialist in Davis School District, said devices are not the end-all.

"(Technology) has made communication more efficient, but it's not a saving grace," West said. Since only 90 percent of communication is verbal, the best way to communicate is pay attention — sitting in front of the person, paying attention, watching their eyes, their looks and asking them what they need.

"Everyone speaks in some form or another, it's whether or not the communication partner takes the time to understand," he said.

For more information about UAAACT visit [www.uaaact.org](http://www.uaaact.org).

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