

Assessing students with Complex Communication Needs to support the Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD) and Disability Inclusion

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1. What are complex communication needs

Complex communication needs (often called CCN) means that a person has difficulty using or understanding speech when communicating with others.

A student with CCN may have very little or no speech. Some students with CCN may be able to say single words however may not be able to put words together into short sentences. Other students with CCN may be able to say more words but have speech that is very difficult to understand, or may be able to use speech but have a lot of trouble understanding what other people say.

Complex communication needs do not get better quickly or easily, even when the student has treatment or therapy that we know works for most people.

Students with CCN usually have other conditions such as childhood apraxia of speech, autism spectrum disorder, cerebral palsy or global developmental delay. On their own, these conditions do not always mean a student has complex communication needs. A speech pathologist is a specialist who can look at all the information about a student and see if they have CCN, in consultation with other medical and allied health professionals such as a doctor and psychologist.

2. How can students with CCN be supported to communicate?

Many students with CCN need to use Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC) to help them communicate and take part in everyday activities. Augmentative and alternative communication refers to all types of communication that helps a student get their message across and to understand the messages they hear. Some students, who can say a few words, use AAC to support their spoken message. Other students with CCN, who cannot use any words, may use AAC all of the time.

There are no skills that a student must have before some kind of AAC can be introduced, and access should never be withheld until they show they can point or match or if you don't think they are ready.

Examples of AAC includes electronic communication aids, such as a communication device or a communication app on an iPad. Sometimes AAC is non electronic, such as a communication book or board, or picture symbol cards. It can also be key word signing, sign language, facial expression or body language.

3. Why is communication important?

Communication is key to all aspects of life including learning and social interaction.

Imagine you are in a foreign country and don't speak or understand the language, yet are expected to learn new things every day at work, make new friends and navigate all the other aspects of life at the same level as native speakers, without any adjustments or accommodations.

Not having access to language or an AAC system that works for a student makes it hard for the student to learn, to show what they need or want to share, show their personality, and to develop relationships with their peers. This can lead to other problems like anxiety or behaviour challenges, as well as withdrawal.

Communication is part of daily life and cannot be considered separately from other activities. Having an effective communication system influences the success of our personal interactions, our involvement in activities, and our ability to make decisions. These can range from everyday decisions, such as which shirt to wear, to life-changing decisions, such as where to live.

(Queensland Department of Communities, Disability Services and Seniors,
Complex Communication Needs Booklet v2, September 2018).

4. What needs to be considered when assessing a student who has or might have complex communication needs?

Assessments Australia completes assessments to support both the Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD) and Disability Inclusion processes for students who are likely to have either an intellectual disability or a severe language disorder with high functional needs (including CCN).

We need to make sure the assessments we do are fair and give the student a chance to show what they know and can do. Sometimes students with CCN may also have an intellectual disability, but not in all cases. It can be hard for students with CCN to show what they know and what they can do because they can't understand what is being asked or don't have the language to answer questions.

Sometimes, if a student has CCN, it may be difficult to test their abilities using a standardised test. If this happens, the psychologist and speech pathologist will need to gather extra information from the school, the family and other professionals. They may observe the student in their classroom, discuss the student's strengths and challenges with their teacher and talk to the student's parents to find out more information about the student's communication.

If the information we have shows that the student may have CCN, our psychologists will consider what is the fairest way for that student to show what they know and can do. They may decide to use a non-verbal cognitive assessment. Further information about these can be found [here](#).

Our speech pathologists have special training and are qualified to assess a student's language, speech and communication skills. They consider each student's ability to access and participate in the assessment process.

The speech pathologist will choose the most appropriate assessment tool for each student based on their age and speech and language ability, and will try to complete:

- A language assessment. This is a test of how well a student understands what others say (such as understanding words, sentences, and instructions) and how well a student uses language to express what they want to say.
- A speech assessment, if the student's speech is very hard to understand. This could be because of Childhood Apraxia of Speech (CAS), dysarthria, or significant hearing impairment.

5. How can schools and parents support students with CCN?

After an assessment by an Assessments Australia psychologist and/or speech pathologist, the school and family will be provided with feedback and a written report with ideas to support the student's communication and learning.

The following are some ideas that can help all students:

- Be an active and accepting communication partner
 - Accept and value all communication attempts, not just speech.
 - Identify the method the student uses to communicate
 - Use that method when you speak to the student e.g. gesture, modelling on their device, using signs.
- Be aware of the way instructions and information are presented. What can you do to help this student understand? Break instructions down, use key words, model what to do, show pictures of what to do.
- Allow enough time for the student to process information (even things that may seem simple to you, like a greeting) and give them an extended time to respond.
- Think about ways a student can show their knowledge without talking. Can they hand in a drawing or typed notes rather than giving a talk about something? Can they show how something works rather than talking about it?
- Model, model, model! If a student uses AAC, talk to them in *their* language! Model how to use this as much as you can. Before most children learn to speak they have heard oral language for more than 4000 hours, yet AAC users are often not supported to learn how to use alternative communication by watching other people use it. Watching other people use AAC may also help the student understand what others are saying.

6. Where can I find out more about CCN?

The following links will take you to support organisations and services that have more information about CCN and AAC. You can also call us on (03) 9678 5100 and ask to speak to one of our speech pathologists.

[AGOSCI - About Us](#)

[Complex communication needs and an introduction to AAC - Source Kids](#)

[Free Resources to Download | NDIS | Scope Australia](#)

[Complex Communication Needs Booklet Version 2, September 2018 \(www.qld.gov.au\)](#)

[Clinical Guidelines \(speechpathologyaustralia.org.au\)](#)

[Speaking of Speech](#)

[When, How, and Why to Use AAC with a Child – Speech And Language Kids](#)

[Blogs - AssistiveWare](#)

[Training for Victorian DE Staff | CPEC](#)