

2021 Gatlinburg Conference Poster Submission

Title: Contextual Determinants that Influence Family Partnerships During Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) Service Delivery During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Introduction: It is the role and responsibility of speech-language pathologists (SLPs) to engage families in planning, decision making, and program implementation¹. Family-centered practices are linked to greater satisfaction with services, increased family involvement, stronger self-efficacy, and enhanced child and family functioning^{2,3}. Children with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) who use Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) and their families are experiencing unprecedented challenges related to service provision due to COVID-19. Children with IDD and limited speech ability often require aided AAC systems, such as picture symbols, communication boards, or speech-generating devices to communicate, and benefit in additional ways from family-centered services. Family involvement is necessary for long-term success with AAC systems⁴. Mandated support services have been disrupted, and families are facilitating therapy services in new ways. Many schools and clinics have transitioned exclusively to telepractice. Telepractice offers potential benefits for serving children who use aided AAC by increasing interaction between SLPs and families⁵. The current COVID-19 pandemic provides a context in which to evaluate the utility of telepractice with children who use AAC, and identify both the facilitators and barriers to supporting family-centered AAC practice. This poster will describe the experiences of 25 parents and 25 SLPs in actively supporting children with IDD who use AAC systems during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, this poster will identify the contextual determinants that either supported successes or created challenges in implementing family-centered practices.

Method: Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with 25 parents and 25 SLPs of children and adults between 3-21 years of age who use aided AAC. Interview questions targeted (1) understanding service delivery changes during the COVID-19 pandemic, (2) perspectives on whether the change in service delivery facilitated or hindered the use of family-centered practice, (3) perspectives on the supports needed to facilitate effective use of family-centered practices, and (4) perspectives of the impact of service delivery changes on child communication outcomes. Qualitative thematic analysis⁶ has been used to identify and consolidate information across each of these areas. This poster will identify and describe the contextual determinants that have either facilitated good family-SLP partnerships, or created barriers to successful family-SLP partnerships during the transition to telepractice during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Results: Families and SLPs individually provided their perspectives regarding contextual factors that facilitated or created barriers to successful partnerships during service provision. Contextual determinants that were found to facilitate good family-SLP partnerships were: caregivers' and family members' active involvement within the therapy session; empowerment and opportunity for caregivers and family members to contribute questions, ideas and insights; shared expectations between the provider and families pertaining to the child's communication goals; and consistent and reliable communication between the provider and families outside of therapy sessions. Contextual determinants that were found to create barriers to successful family-SLP partnerships were: unequal opportunities for the families to lead and participate actively in the therapy session compared to the provider; lack of responsiveness from the families in planning and providing feedback in preparation for the therapy session; poor or unreliable internet connection and other related technology factors in which it was difficult for both the family and provider to actively participate and coordinate together; and overwhelming pressures on families to lead and facilitate their child's communication during the therapy session while also balancing work from home and other COVID-related changes to a family's life. Additionally, there were broader determinants related to insurance reimbursement and/or school policies regarding technology and home use that created barriers to service delivery, thus impacting parent-SLP partnerships.

Discussion: Overall, these findings emphasize the importance of considering the contextual determinants of both the family and provider that may support or hinder the relationship between the family and SLP during telepractice. Preliminary findings suggest that SLPs are finding, with the incorporation of family-centered practices, that families' active participation and

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involvement in the child's session facilitates successful partnerships. In turn, family-provider partnerships seemingly influence the child's communication success with the growing competence and independence in parent-guided teaching. Moreover, with the transition to telepractice services, many facilitative contextual determinants were hallmark components of family-centered practice. Perspectives on barriers to family-centered practice and successful family-provider partnerships warrant further consideration as intervention is increasingly provided via telepractice. Telepractice may actually bridge a gap related to family support that may be missing otherwise in AAC service provision. This poster will present our initial steps in identifying the facilitators of successful family-SLP partnerships during telepractice. Findings will be used to develop and evaluate a remote service delivery model for children with IDD who use AAC that is built on these facilitators. These findings are useful for informing telepractice with individuals with IDD who use AAC both during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

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