

MASKS, COMMUNICATION AND KEY WORD SIGN

In this time of a global pandemic, masks are increasingly becoming part of normal dress, especially for those of us in Stage 4 lockdown in Victoria. Some of us find that masks act as a barrier for successful communication - speech is a little muffled and facial expression and other such cues are largely invisible. Think about the experience of children and adults with an intellectual disability who have some trouble understanding what others say - it's even harder now when their communication partners are wearing masks. Key Word Sign (KWS) and the clear use of natural gesture are more important than ever. For a video about this, go to: <https://www.facebook.com/KWSAustralia/posts/2712093349073214>.

KWS is the use of manual sign and natural gestures to support the communication and language development of children and adults with communication difficulties. KWS is one of the most widely used strategies utilised by people of all ages who cannot communicate by speech alone. KWS uses manual signs from the local deaf sign language (Auslan in Australia), but unlike Auslan users, we use speech with sign, and the signing used is simplified.

Use of KWS and gesture can help people understand what is being said to them and can be a way of sending a message for someone whose speech is unclear or still developing. KWS has been used in Australia for over 30 years with people of all ages who have difficulties with spoken communication. The use of KWS can help promote communication, participation and inclusion for children in the early years. (Cologon & Mevawalla 2018). Many children who use KWS will go on to develop speech and gradually reduce their use of sign. Some people with more significant problems producing speech will continue to use KWS alongside aided forms of communication such as picture-based books or electronic communication devices. Some adults with intellectual disability rely on KWS as a primary means of communication. (Dark, Brownlie & Bloomberg, 2019). These people are heavily reliant on their communication partners' skills and knowledge and their ongoing use of KWS to support communication.



Signing the word 'tunnel'.

Communication is a shared responsibility and it's important that the communication partners of people who have problems with communication take responsibility for learning and supporting the communication techniques of the person with little or no speech. This is true for people using aided forms of communication as well as those who rely on KWS and gesture to understand what others are saying to them, and/or to get their message across. We know that the use of KWS can increase the ability of adults with communication difficulties to understand what is said to them and to express themselves (Rombouts, Maes, & Zink 2017).

“Sam*” is a good example of how important it is for communication partners to learn and to use KWS and gesture. Sam is a man who has never developed speech. He used to live in a house in a country area with several other men with ID. The staff who worked in that house were all familiar with KWS and used it consistently. Sam was able to understand what others were saying to him and could get his message across with an extensive use of sign and natural gesture. He also developed a range of “idiosyncratic signs”, largely to refer to people. These were not conventional or easily recognisable signs, but Sam's family, friends and support staff all understood who the signs referred to.

Sam moved to a different house and was then living with and being supported by people who did not use KWS. No-one really saw the need to learn because Sam could communicate his basic needs with natural gesture or by going to the place or thing that he wanted. Sam's support staff felt that they “understood everything he wants”. But Sam was used to having much broader communications with people - he liked to have a chat about what he had done that day, what he might be doing tomorrow and to joke about the people he knew. And no one knew enough sign to understand anything more than a simple request for something. Sam became increasingly unhappy and his behaviour became increasingly challenging.

Eventually Sam moved again, and this time his support staff and the people he lived with all learned KWS. They also documented his idiosyncratic signs, so that everyone knew what Sam was saying. Sam is now a happy and jovial man, with a number of friends and involved in a wide range of activities.



Signing the phrase 'thank you'.

KWS workshops are available for these communication partners, whether they be family, friends or support staff. KWS workshops are delivered by accredited KWS Presenters. Currently there are about 150 accredited KWS Presenters across Australia. However, as with all services, access to this training and support is much more limited in rural and remote areas. One of the benefits of the recent pandemic is that we are all becoming more familiar and adept with a range of technological tools for staying connected and coming together to meet and to learn. With this, KWS Presenters are beginning to offer workshops online, extending the accessibility of training.

For more information on KWS and its use, go to: www.kwsa.com.au or follow us on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/KWSAustralia>.

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