

A Communication Success Story

HOW ONE AUTISTIC BOY HAS LEARNED TO SPEAK AND READ WITH HELP FROM HIS "TALKER"

When 9-year-old Max rides around his home town with his mom Theresa, he enjoys helping with directions. "On Salem, off Salem, turn College. Turn left. Go straight. "He'll read each and every street sign on the way. He tells us where he wants to go. We joke that instead of a Tom-Tom GPS we have our own Max-Max," Theresa says.

While most parents would expect this from a chatty child who is fascinated with cities, Max is no average boy: he's moderately autistic and was never expected to speak. It was when he received what the family calls his talker - a Prentke Romich (PRC) Vantage speech generating device that has been by his side for the last two years - that Max's journey to speaking and reading began.

Max was two when he was diagnosed with autism. "When he turned one, he was saying 'mama' and 'baby.' That happened five times, maybe, and it stopped by 15 months and there was nothing after that," Theresa says.

Max began a therapy regime right away, and until he was seven had utilized Picture Exchange Communication (PEC) and was using some modified signs he had adapted. "The problem was, signs worked at home for Mom and Dad because we understood them, but not with others," Theresa says.

LEARNING WHAT MAX 'WANTS'

"When Max got his talker - which allows him to press buttons with letters and images on them that then 'speak' for him - it was a godsend. He could tell us he was hungry. He could say, 'I want to eat,' or 'I want to drink' - and not just drink, but 'drink chocolate milk.'

"In the beginning it was 'I want, I want, I want' for the most part, and that was just wonderful. But then Max started getting frustrated with that because it was limited, and he started figuring out how to use it to do other things. He would practice with it," his mother says.



Theresa joyfully recalls the day Max first used his talker to tell her he was aware of his surroundings. "We drove past a fence and without prompting, all of a sudden the talker said 'fence,' and I said, 'You're right Max. That is a fence.' We went home and I programmed the talker with brick fence, wood fence, chain link fence, every kind of fence there is. That's part of it, predicting what he might say and programming the device.

"Then, on the way to school, there is a fence with a star on it and he began building on what he was communicating. He said 'star fence' and I was able to say, 'Yes, there is a star on that fence.'"

Theresa says one of the first full sentences Max constructed on his talker happened after a storm. "We drove past the golf course and he said, 'tree fall down golf course.' At the time, he said 'horse' instead of 'course' but it showed he was finding his language," she explains.

BUILDING ON SUCCESS

Max's sentences became more complex, and at the same time he did what his Mom never dreamed - he began repeating the words he communicated on his talker. His first word? "Fence!" Theresa remembers with a chuckle. "It wasn't perfectly pronounced, but I understood it.

"He was practicing what he was hearing and it was just wonderful - it was so exciting and impressive."

But Max wasn't done amazing his parents. As he became fascinated with cities and streets, he began using the device to spell the names of streets letter by letter - also an option on the PRC device - and use it to pronounce the word for him. Then he would repeat it verbally.

"That's when we began having to tell our non-verbal child to be quiet," Theresa kids.

Today - astoundingly - Max is at the point where he doesn't need the talker. "He is getting better at speaking and is more confident. He'll use it now when we can't understand what he's telling us," she says.

He also uses it to read. "He wasn't reading that we knew of before the talker. Now, he'll read a sentence with his talker and then press speak display to hear it, then say it verbally," she explains.

Theresa credits the device with much more than helping Max communicate - though that would be plenty, she says. "It has helped his interaction with people. His cousins, for example, are more comfortable with him. Now they see that he may be different, but he likes and wants the same things.

"And it helps me as an overprotective mom," she admits. Theresa recounted a frightening experience when Max attended camp before he had his talker. "He wasn't carrying a PEC book and he wandered away. It was terrifying, but I wouldn't have been as panicked if he had his talker. There would have more than just dumb luck involved in finding him," she says. (A stranger located him in a nearby parking lot and returned him to the camp.)



WHY THE VANTAGE

John Halloran, a speech pathology consultant, says unlike other devices, the Vantage is set up so the user puts individual words together to say what they want to communicate. With other systems, phrases, like "I want to go the bathroom," or "That's fun," are programmed. "It's more difficult to string phrases together than it is words," he explains.

Once users learn a word, they press button A for a category - like animals. Then they press button B for a specific animal - like "dog." Keys have images that symbolize words.

"This allows kids to develop an internal motor plan to 'speak,' which leads to eventual automaticity on the device, similar to playing the piano or typing. In some other systems, there is not a consistent motor plan. In art class, button A might say "red;" at lunch time button A might say "drink;" and at home it might say "daddy."

"This means the child would have to learn what all the pictures meant, look for them and know how to find the 'home page' if he wants to draw a picture of 'daddy' in art. It's

slow, though to some people not in the field, it might look easier," John says.

Max's mother says the Vantage was the ideal match for Max. "Everyone has the same reaction at first: How in the world am I going to learn this? What's the logic? But once you start playing with it you understand why things are where they are," she says.

"The challenge, for me, is deciding where to program a word. Like sidewalk. Should it go next to buildings or by building parts or home parts? Next to streets and roads? But as you go along, you figure it out. I'll give the talker to Max and look to see where he goes - what's his first impulse. That's what works for us," she says.

EXPRESSING EMOTION

And works well, says Kathy Ruesing, the paraprofessional who has worked with Max since he was in Kindergarten at Conway's Julia Lee Moore Elementary School and who is his afterschool and summer babysitter. "He's such a smart little boy, but communication-wise he was very frustrated. There's so much he wanted to tell us but couldn't," Kathy says of those early years teaching Max.

The talker has allowed Max not only to initiate conversation, but also to express emotion, she says. "When the Michael Jackson memorial was on television, he came up to me and verbally said 'church song.' Then he said something else and I couldn't understand him. So he went over to the machine and typed in 'sad church song.' That made me laugh," she says.

Kathy says they use the Edmark Reading Program for students with learning disabilities and Max is now reading sentences. "But he also reads signs on the side of the road - everything," she adds.

Like Theresa, Kathy also says Max is "obsessed" with traveling. "He wants to talk about the roads we're on and he knows them verbally. If I can't understand, he'll look at me, roll his eyes and type it in," she says with a chuckle.



Kathy says Max's teacher, Nancy Hill, is fluent with the Vantage device and has attended several in-service trainings. She credits her with helping Max succeed. "Once we got it, Max picked it up and ran with it; we practice and play games with it daily," Kathy says.

Nancy is as proud as Theresa and Kathy of Max's achievements, citing unexpected milestone after milestone. "In music class, for example, he used to have poor behavior; he would be wild and scream. But then we got him involved in the Christmas program. The choir director had him make the introduction to the program on his machine. When he saw he was part of the group he began participating. He did the hand motions and everything," Nancy says.

"I think because of his machine he is no longer frustrated. He does not have the emotional outbursts and is less aggressive because of it. He was in a shell unable to communicate, so he

stayed there. Now he goes out of his way to be sociable with other kids. This year, for him, he had his first girlfriend. You could see the emotion in his eyes with her. Socially this has done so much," she adds.

limitations on the kids. Maybe because of the communication skills he's already developed he'll use that device to do something to blow us all away. Again."



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HIGH MARKS

Kathy says, "I don't know if the light bulb would have ever come on for the communication to kick in for Max without the Vantage. Now, he's just amazing."

Nancy agrees: "Without the machine, I feel like he could have become one of those lost kids I've seen in the past years, who become aggressive because nobody understands them."

Kathy admits this is high praise - especially from her. "At first I thought it would be a crutch. Why should he talk when this would do it for him? But it's the way it's designed - he gets it. There's a picture to go with the word and he knows what the symbols on the keys stand for; he understands," she adds.

In fact, Theresa says her son knows the machine so well he learned to unlock the password-protected screen parents utilize for maintenance. "One day he was practicing with it and he came into the room and showed us the screen - he had gotten in the 'back door' and was playing with things he wasn't supposed to have access to. I think he did it just to show us he could."

What Max will do and learn next is an exciting wait-and-see time for those who love and care for him.

Kathy says "I think it may open up another world that maybe we're not aware he can function in. I think sometimes we put