

Researcher helps give children with autism the chance to communicate

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Research by Victoria University PhD education graduand Larah van der Meer highlights the importance of understanding the communication preferences of children with developmental disabilities such as autism.

Larah's study investigated ways of teaching alternative [communication](#) methods to children with autism and related developmental disabilities, who don't use speech.

Her research has led to a new approach for assessing children's

communication preferences, which could help improve treatment outcomes.

Part of Larah's study involved looking at individual children's preferences for using specific communication systems, and measuring the effect these had on developing their communication skills.

Eight children from Wellington and four from Nijmegen, in The Netherlands, took part in the study, learning how to ask for snacks and toys using three alternatives to speech: [sign language](#), pointing to or exchanging pictures, and using new speech-generating technology.

In her study, Larah used an [iPad](#) equipped with a new speech-generating software programme. She found that eight of the children in the study preferred to use the speech-generating technology to communicate.

Larah's results also showed that children were better at learning and maintaining the communication skills when using their preferred communication option.

"Giving children the opportunity to choose their preferred type of communication can be viewed as promoting an important sense of self-determination, which might also increase their progress in learning to communicate," says Larah.

"It's exciting because the results are providing [empirical evidence](#) demonstrating the effectiveness of new technologies, such as iPads loaded with speech-generating software, as alternative communication options for children with autism."

To ensure that all the [children](#) who took part in her research could continue in their communication development after completing the study, Larah fundraised to buy an iPad for one of her research

participants, Izack Halvorson. Larah describes him as a charismatic young boy who has the desire to communicate, but whose speech is mostly unintelligible.

The iPad proved to be Izack's preferred mode of communication. Amongst teaching a range of communication skills, Larah worked with Izack's family to use the iPad to take photos of his friends, family, and teachers, and programmed the software so he can touch the photos and create voice-output with individualised greetings for each of the people important to him.

"It really is incredible. The iPad has given him the gift of being able to express himself and be understood by others for the first time," says Larah.

Provided by Victoria University

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