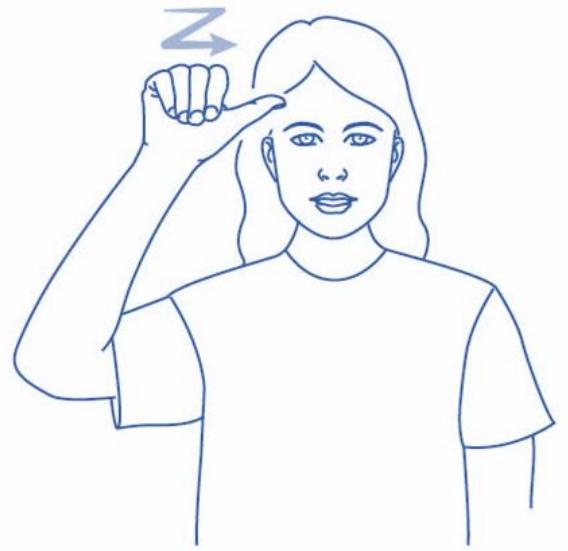




RESEARCH SUMMARY: Key word signing usage of adults with intellectual disabilities: Influence of communication partners' sign usage and responsivity

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Summary of Key Messages

- The use of key word sign (KWS) can increase the ability of adults with communication difficulties to understand what is said to them and express themselves
- Adults with intellectual disabilities may find it difficult to remember things and need many opportunities to learn
- The communication partner using KWS in everyday activities encourages the use of signs by adults with intellectual disabilities
- The communication partner may need to directly teach the signs as well as using them in everyday activities
- The communication partner may need to use a responsive communication style to help the person to use KWS
- A responsive communication style is one in which the partner responds positively to communication attempts, follows the person's interests, uses language the person understands, encourages the person to take turns and creates opportunities for communication
- Staff find it difficult to maintain their use of KWS if the people they support do not use sign
- There is considerable variability in how adults with intellectual disability use and acquire KWS
- Adults with intellectual disability who have little or no speech and/or a greater need of a way to communicate than those with speech, are more likely to use KWS
- Adults with intellectual disability who use KWS spontaneously produce more signs in conversation than those who need to be prompted
- Adults with intellectual disability who need to be prompted to sign will use more KWS when they see signs being used, and when they see their signs imitated
- The consistent use of KWS by staff may encourage adults with intellectual disability to continue to use signs
- Adults with different levels of intellectual and communicative difficulty may need different types of support

More about this research

The authors wanted to know what might increase the KWS usage of adults with intellectual disabilities who already had some KWS skills. They were interested in how the sign use of the person with intellectual disability would increase when their communication partners used more KWS and sign imitation.

What did the researchers do?

They videotaped 15 adults with moderate or severe intellectual disability who had used Flemish KWS for at least a year in a 10-minute conversation with three familiar staff members. The staff members had varying levels of KWS proficiency. The conversation was videoed in a separate room. The data collected was coded for type of conversational function and number of signs used per turn or utterance.

What did the researchers find?

Overall, they analysed the data at three different levels: the whole group; subgroups and at an individual level. Findings of the whole group indicated that the characteristics of the person with an intellectual disability, the communication partners' use of and ability to imitate signs and the partners' conversation style were important. These findings demonstrated that if the person with an intellectual disability could use KWS spontaneously, they were more likely to use novel utterances than those who needed prompting to sign. These novel utterances were also more likely to happen if the communication partner used many signs. A responsive conversational style added to the likelihood of increased sign use. At the subgroup level there was a continuum of use from those who independently used a high number of signs to those who used a low number of signs and needed prompting. Most individuals increased their use of sign with increased sign imitation from their communication partners. At an individual level, those who had no speech and needed to use KWS used more signs than those who could use some speech.

The findings support the argument that consistent use of sign by communication partners supports individuals to maintain their use of KWS.

What does this information mean for practice?

This was only a small study using Flemish KWS with some study design limitations, so implications need to be considered cautiously. As a speech pathologist delivering training to staff there are two main points to include in the training. Spontaneous sign usage by adult with an intellectual disability is highly variable and different characteristics of the person with an intellectual disability may influence their need for key word sign. For instance, those who find it easier to speak may prefer using speech over sign even if speech not easily understood. Increased sign imitation can be of benefit for individuals who use less KWS spontaneously. If communication partners are trained to communicate using a responsive communication style and to encourage the use of sign in everyday activities, this is likely to maintain or increase sign usage by adults with an intellectual disability.

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