

Redefining mentoring in unique communication scenarios

Phase 1

Traditional mentoring means getting support and advice from someone with experience to help another person grow. Peer mentoring is when people with similar life experiences support each other. It can help build confidence and independence. But many mentoring programs rely on talking, which can make it hard for people with communication disability to take part.

In June 2024, Two Way Street and AGOSCI received a three-year ILC grant from the Australian Government. The project will look at new ways to make mentoring work well for people with communication disability. The aim is to create a toolkit that can be used across Australia to achieve the benefits of mentoring for people of all ages and communication styles, from young children to adults. The toolkit will be made in ways that are easy for everyone to use.

What is happening in the project?

- **Phase 1: Learning from others**

We began by finding out what is already known about mentoring. This included reading past research and talking to people in the community. We wanted to learn what is working well, what isn't, and what is missing. As part of this, the Two Way Street team completed a detailed review of the research.

- **Phase 2: Working together**

Next, we will work closely with people with communication disability. We will talk with them in interviews and focus groups to help design the toolkit together.

- **Phase 3: Creating the toolkit**

Finally, we will make the toolkit. It will include resources in accessible formats and be based on feedback from people with communication disability and others involved in the project. This will help make sure it meets real needs.

What did we do in phase 1?

What is mentoring?

Mentoring is when someone with experience (a mentor) supports and helps someone with less experience (a mentee). The mentor gives advice, shares ideas, and helps the mentee learn and grow. Mentoring can happen at work, at school, or in everyday life. It doesn't have to be formal—if someone comes to you for help or advice, you might already be a mentor. If you get advice or guidance from others, you might already be a mentee. Most people are usually both mentees and mentors. Sometimes they don't even realise.

Who is a mentor?

A mentor is someone who:

- Has experience in a certain area
- Shares advice and knowledge
- Helps the mentee set and reach goals
- Gives support and feedback
- May connect the mentee to new people or opportunities

Mentors don't need all the answers. They enable mentees in making their own decisions.

Who is a mentee?

A mentee:

- Wants to learn and grow
- Is open to advice and feedback
- Works toward personal or professional goals
- Uses what they learn from the mentor

Mentors vs. Role Models

Mentors give personal, direct support. Role models inspire by example but may not be directly involved. People can be both mentors and role models without realising it.

Why does mentoring matter?

Mentoring helps people:

- Learn new skills
- Build confidence
- Connect with others
- Feel supported
- Make decisions for themselves but not have to do it alone

Mentoring also benefits mentors by helping them grow and feel proud. It supports organisations by encouraging learning and inclusion.

Mentoring for people with communication disability (PWCD)

People with communication disability (PWCD) can benefit a lot from mentoring. But mentoring may need to be done in a different way. Communication is a big part of mentoring, and some mentees are still learning how to share their ideas. Some people wrongly believe that PWCD can't make their own choices—this is not true.

This project aims to:

- Make sure the benefits of mentoring are available to everyone
- Learn how people with communication disability take in advice and make decisions
- Explore how mentors and role models can be inclusive of different ways of communicating, like using AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication)
- Recognise that we are all influenced by the people around us—and for people with communication disability, this may include key communication partners and supporters

What makes mentoring work?

Good mentoring relationships:

- Are simple and flexible
- Have shared goals and clear expectations
- Include emotional connection and respect

Other helpful elements include:

- Group mentoring and storytelling
- Support during life changes (e.g., becoming an adult)
- Training for mentors

What are the challenges in mentoring for people with communication disability (PWCD)?

Many mentoring programs are not designed to meet the unique needs of PWCD, which can make it hard for them to take part.

Key challenges:

- Programs often use a one-size-fits-all approach that doesn't support different ways of communicating
- Mentors may not be trained to interact with people who use AAC or other communication tools
- Too much focus on spoken communication, with few visual or AAC options
- Not many mentors have lived experience with communication disability
- Programs may not include teaching self-advocacy skills
- Getting to know a mentor or mentee takes sharing of ideas and information which take a lot of time for people who use AAC

What are the communication barriers?

- Using different ways to communicate it can take longer to build trust
- Some digital platforms are hard to use or don't enable how a person prefers to communicate
- Support people may sometimes speak for the person, which can reduce their independence and ability to share their own thoughts

What are some other challenges:

- Programs that are too complex or take too much time can make people not want to join
- Mentees may lose interest if the program doesn't match their goals
- Many programs start too late and miss chances to support self-determination early in life
- There are not enough trained mentors who understand communication disability
- Misunderstandings can make it harder to build trust and connection

What are the different types of mentoring?

- Formal mentoring:
Planned and structured. People are matched, and there are clear goals.
- Informal mentoring:
More casual and based on relationships. This can work well for people from marginalised groups.
- Peer or reciprocal mentoring:
Both people support each other equally. They learn and grow together.
- Group mentoring:
A group of people learn together. It helps build confidence and social connections.

Power mentoring and inclusive approaches

Power mentoring is not just one-on-one. It focuses on building networks of support. It values:

- Including people with all kinds of experiences
- Helping people take control of their own learning
- Support that goes both ways, everyone gives and receives
- The idea that everyone has something to offer

These networks can help people who are often left out of leadership roles feel more included and supported.

What is E-Mentoring?

E-mentoring happens online. It can use video calls, chat, email, or social media.

It can be helpful for people with communication disability because it gives more time to process and respond. It also offers more flexibility and access.

Challenges include:

- Less face-to-face connection
- Needing digital skills
- Privacy and safety concerns

How often and how long should mentoring sessions be?

Mentoring can be short or long. It can happen every week or less often. It depends on what the person wants.

Programs with set time limits help people stay focused. Programs that go on without an end can lose meaning if there is no clear finish or outcome.

What is the cost of mentoring?

In disability programs, mentoring can use funding like Australia's NDIS. Most mentors volunteer and don't get paid because they also learn and benefit. But many people think mentors should be paid to respect their time and skills.

What do people talk about in mentoring?

Mentoring for PWCD often covers:

- Career and education planning
- Building skills like communication and leadership
- Confidence and personal growth
- Problem-solving real-life issues
- Networking and meeting peers
- Goal-setting and self-advocacy

Mentoring may be arranged by others, but supporting PWCD to choose mentors and goals is key for self-directed mentoring.

How do you become a mentor?

People can become mentors by:

- Volunteering in programs
- Being asked by someone
- Informally supporting peers

Mentors also learn and grow through the experience.

What is good training for mentors (and mentees)?

Good training teaches:

- How to ask open questions and encourage talking
- How to support different ways people learn
- How to build trust and respect
- How to be a guide, helper, listener, problem solver, and supporter

Example:

AAC Mentor Leadership Training covers goal-setting, communication skills (like the LAFF strategy), problem-solving (the DO IT! method), and easy-to-use online tools.

Training helps mentors and mentees do better by making roles and communication clearer.

In Phase 1, we also learned that training might also be needed to help people with communication disability to share their interests, knowledge and skills with others who are looking for a mentor.

How do people with communication disability become a mentee or find mentoring?

PWCD often find mentoring through:

- Parents, teachers, or therapists setting it up
- Research projects
- Meeting someone by chance at events

But these ways don't always let PWCD choose their mentor or share what they really need.

Why does matching mentors matter?

Mentoring works best when:

- Mentees get to choose their mentor
- They have things in common, like interests or ways of communicating
- The relationship feels comfortable and respectful

For people with communication disability, matching should also think about:

- How they communicate
- Their personal goals and interests
- How they like to interact (in person, online, AAC, etc.)
- Personality fit

Matching can be hard because many PWCD:

- Don't always know their goals yet
- Can't easily say what they want in a mentor
- Can't try different mentors before choosing

It's important to start mentoring by exploring goals first.

How can we make mentoring more inclusive for people with communication disability?

New definition:

“Mentoring is a flexible and inclusive relationship where both mentor and mentee learn and grow. It can happen in all kinds of ways and both mentor and mentee may not even be aware that it's happening at times. Communication is adapted to fit the person, not the other way around.”

Ways to improve:

- Make current programs more inclusive by adapting communication and training mentors
- Include mentors who have lived experience with communication disability
- Improve how mentors and mentees are matched
- Use tools that everyone can access

Create new models that:

- Help people take charge of their own learning
- Keep things simple
- Build networks instead of one-on-one hierarchies
- Support communication with tools and help from others
- Allow different ways and levels of taking part

What are the benefits of mentoring for PWCD and their community?

For mentees:

- Builds confidence and communication skills
- Helps with solving problems and setting goals
- Provides role models and emotional support

For mentors with disability:

- Improves communication and leadership skills
- Gives a sense of purpose and self-worth
- Allows them to give back and grow
- Strengthens their identity and ability to speak up

For families and caregivers:

- Shows real success with AAC
- Helps them understand what is possible
- Builds helpful support networks
- Encourages using AAC and communication strategies

For educators and therapists:

- Shows what PWCD can achieve
- Encourages better support and higher expectations
- Offers new ways to teach
- Helps create meaningful, long-term results

What happened next?

After looking at what research says about mentoring and communication disability, we wanted to hear from people with real-life experience.

We invited AAC users and researchers to join a webinar led by Two Way Street's Director, Janelle Sampson. Together, we talked about mentoring and shared real-life stories and ideas.

Mentoring in AAC – webinar summary

February 2025 – The first step in a three-year project

Two Way Street ran a webinar led by Janelle Sampson, a senior speech pathologist.

Special guests were Dr. Emma Grace, Dr. Lateef McLeod, and Dr. Liora Ballin.

People who use AAC, as well as their families, therapists, teachers, and support workers, joined the event.

What did we learn?

Mentoring is more than giving advice. It helps people feel more confident, understand themselves, and feel included.

Mentors also learn and grow. They build skills in leadership, problem-solving, and communication. Many feel their life has more purpose.

Mentoring works best when families, schools, and communities all support it.

Technology can make mentoring easier by allowing people to connect online. But some online tools don't work well for AAC users.

Traditional mentoring programs don't always meet the needs of AAC users. We need to change how mentoring is done so it works better for everyone.

What are the concerns with mentoring for AAC users?

Mentoring can be harder for people who use AAC because of:

- Problems with technology or equipment
- Different ways people communicate or different skill levels
- Hard times finding the right time to meet
- Feeling frustrated or worried
- Programs that expect people to talk quickly or use speech too much
- Not enough mentors who know about AAC
- Not many role models who show how to stand up for yourself
- Support people being there, which can make it harder to be independent
- Different reasons why people want to join mentoring
- Communication often takes longer

How should mentoring be done?

People had different ideas about mentoring:

- Some want it to last a certain time; others want it to be flexible and ongoing.
- Some think mentors should get paid; others think it should be voluntary.
- Some prefer one-on-one mentoring with clear goals; others like group or informal mentoring.

This means one style doesn't work for everyone. The mentoring toolkit we are making will be flexible.

What don't we know yet?

- There isn't much research about mentoring for people who use AAC.
- Many mentoring relationships are informal and don't have clear rules.
- We need to learn more about what helps mentoring work well for AAC users.

What makes mentoring work well?

- Matching mentors and mentees who have similar experiences, like using the same AAC device
- Setting clear goals and some structure
- Mentors sharing what they know and showing how to do things
- Support that helps both mentors and mentees grow

What happened next?

After the webinar, many people wanted to learn more about how mentoring can be better for people with communication disability. We kept gathering ideas at the 2025 AGOSCI Conference through talks, podcasts with Top Bunk, and surveys.

Podcast and survey at the 2025 AGOSCI conference

At the AGOSCI conference in Adelaide, Two Way Street worked with Top Bunk to record podcasts. We talked with many people from the AAC community—people who use AAC, their families, therapists, teachers, and support workers.

We talked about how mentoring helps, the challenges, and different ways to do mentoring. Stories showed how mentoring builds skills, confidence, and community.

Why does mentoring matter?

For people being mentored (mentees):

- **Build skills and confidence:** Mentees get better at speaking up, making choices, and using AAC. Mentors help them believe in themselves.
- **Learn by watching:** Mentees learn by seeing how mentors use AAC in real life.
- **Everyday support:** Mentors help with real-life things like work, friends, and making decisions.
- **Feel included:** Mentoring helps people feel like they belong. It can lead to strong friendships.
- **Feel inspired:** Seeing what others can do gives hope and ideas for the future.
- **Start early:** Mentoring should begin when children first start using AAC and learning to be independent.

For mentors:

- **Teach to learn:** Teaching others helps mentors build their own skills.
- **Grow as a leader:** Mentoring helps mentors build confidence, leadership, and trust.
- **Give back:** Mentors support the AAC community and help new users feel welcome.
- **Support for life:** Mentoring can grow and change as people do, at every stage of life.

What are the challenges with mentoring?

- **Fear or worry:** Some people are afraid of being judged or misunderstood, so they don't take part.
- **Not enough resources:** There isn't enough good information or support, especially for people with disability or from diverse backgrounds.
- **Hard to organise:** It can be difficult to find the right mentor, manage time, or deal with distance.
- **System issues:** There aren't many role models who use AAC, and mentoring is not always treated as an important support.
- **Being ready:** Some mentees might not feel ready. Mentoring needs to start slowly and with the right support.

What are different ways to mentor?

Mentoring can happen in many ways:

- **In person or online:**
You can meet face-to-face, or connect by video call, phone, text, or email.
- **One-on-one or in groups:**
Mentoring can be just two people or in a group. It can be formal or casual.
- **Through media:**
Watching or following AAC users on social media, YouTube, or TV can be a type of mentoring.
- **People you know:**
Mentors can be family members, friends, teachers, or people you work with.
- **Peer mentors:**
People who use AAC themselves often make great mentors because they understand what it's like.

What makes mentoring work better?

- **Start early:**
Begin mentoring when parents start using AAC with their child and as the child becomes more independent.
- **Train and support mentors:**
Good mentors are patient, calm, listen well, give encouragement, show respect, have experience, and share similar goals.
- **Match by shared interests:**
Having things in common helps people feel more comfortable and build trust.
- **Create safe spaces:**
Both the mentor and mentee need to feel safe and supported to learn and grow.
- **Use accessible resources:**
Tools and materials should match the mentee's age, skills, and way of communicating.
- **Focus on real life:**
Mentoring should help with real things like work, friendships, and everyday life—not just talk about ideas.

How do we build community through mentoring?

- Mentoring doesn't just help one person—it helps the whole AAC community.
- Sharing stories and learning from each other helps people feel included and supported.
- Listening to people who communicate in different ways helps us understand their experiences.
- Mentoring encourages people to give back and support others, so the whole community can grow together.

What did we learn from social media this year?

From January to June 2025, we shared lots of posts about mentoring and many people got involved.

- **February:**
This was our busiest month. Posts had the most likes, comments, and shares. Almost 100 people signed up for the Open Forum, and 15 joined live. Posts about the AGOSCI Conference also got a lot of attention.
- **March:**
Posts still got likes and shares, but fewer people left comments.
- **April and May:**
People stayed interested. In May, we shared a short video that got extra attention.
- **June:**
There were fewer likes and comments, but some people visited our website or filled out forms to learn more.

Overall:

People are interested—especially during events or when we share key posts.

Thank you and what's next

Thank you to Top Bunk for making the podcast series and AGOSCI for hosting the conference. Thanks also to everyone who visited the Two Way Street booth, did surveys, or took part in podcasts. Your voices are helping shape this project and show how mentoring can really help.

Phase 1 recap

In Phase 1, we listened to the community and research to understand mentoring for people with communication disability. We learned what helps, what is hard, and what is missing.

Looking ahead to phase 2

In Phase 2, in collaboration with the advisory committee and others we will deep dive into:

- Accessible meeting formats
- How mentoring relationships grow and change
- What mentors and mentees do and need
- What makes mentoring work and what blocks it
- Real examples from the AAC community

We will keep listening to community stories and ideas, review good programs and practices and gather real-life experiences. Based on this, we'll create and test new resources shaped by what works and your feedback. Our goal in phase 3 with your feedback, we will build an easy to use toolkit with guidelines, information, and tools to help everyone with mentoring.

We want to include many different AAC journeys. What we learned in Phase 1 is already helping us as we co-design tools and resources to support mentoring that truly works for and with people.

Get involved

This is an ongoing project, and your ideas matter. Like and share our developments on Facebook and LinkedIn.

To get the full Phase 1 report or share your thoughts, please contact:

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