



Images more than words

## Using Express with children who have additional needs

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Broad Park House is a short break residential home for young people with learning disabilities and additional needs aged 5 to 18 years. We support lots of young people who are nonverbal, including some who also have quite severe autism. They work well with visual aids such as pictures and symbols, so when we saw the Mind Of My Own Express app – which uses images more than words - we knew we would find it valuable.

### **Face-to-face time has been limited**

During COVID-19 restrictions, when face-to-face time has been limited, the app has enabled us to keep in contact. We had to suspend our overnight service earlier in the year but changed the way we worked and started to go out to our families to support them. This enabled them all to still have a break and by getting the young people out to exercise, promoted their health and well-being. We were limited in using the app until we recommenced overnight stays on the 10th August. Since then, we have been using it with the young people to gain an understanding of how they are feeling and if they are particularly worried about anything.

### **Feelings never shared before**

The results have been really revealing. For example, one young person who is largely nonverbal used the app to express feelings that she had never shared before with any member of staff or even her social worker before. She talked about things she liked and didn't like, and her social worker was able to raise this in her Child in Need meeting as issues that were important to her. The app has also shown that sometimes we do underestimate young people's level of understanding. A young man who is using the Express app surprised all of us with the amount he understood and could comment on. For example, he could identify food that he liked in particular for his breakfast.

### **Achieving more than verbal communication**

You can't assume that just because there are communication difficulties, that the use of technology won't work. For many young people communicating through gadgets and apps



will achieve more than verbal communication. As workers, we often see the young people communicate through behaviours - they get very frustrated because they're unable to express themselves. Giving them the opportunity to express themselves using technology gives us more opportunity to understand them, their likes and dislikes and meet their needs effectively.

### **Being creative**

We are also using the app to improve our services, getting feedback from our non-verbal young people about our services and what makes them feel safe. And I think if people are a little creative, they can make Express work for a lot of young people, dipping into certain areas and topics and using it for what they need. It's also about understanding the learning needs of the young person you're looking after so you're confident they understand what's being asked of them. You've got to know them quite well.