Hi. My name is Siobhan. I am 17 years old, I actually turn 18 on Sunday which is pretty exciting. I finished school in November last year and I am now training three days a week in my beloved sport of Boccia. I like listening to music and watching TV. To be completely and utterly ironic up front, other than representing Australia in the 2020 Paralympics, and every other games after that, one of my biggest life goals is to become a speech pathologist. Why? I love AAC, and I know AAC better than the back of my right hand, even though I look at both for the exact same amount of time every day.

I know that becoming a speech pathologist seems like an absolutely crazy career choice for me considering I use AAC, I technically can't eat orally and I need a speech pathologist myself, but I love AAC and I believe everyone who needs AAC should use it. I went to the AGOSCI conference last year where I met so many speech pathologists and AAC users and pretty much everybody else who belongs to the AAC world, and I was shown that that was the world I belonged in, almost as much as I belong to the Boccia world. I felt at home, I was already well respected even though I hadn't really entered the AAC space before, and I don't know about any of you but I thought the people I met over those three days were pretty awesome.

Before I get into the main component of my presentation, I figure I should briefly tell you my journey using AAC.

When I was little I would use pictures and symbols in a book, which was sort of like a podd, before they were a thing. I am going to have a guess and say each of the pictures meant something seemingly important. I would try to flip through the pages even though I probably couldn't turn a page for the life of me and that's how mum knew I knew there were more words.

Then after that I was given some of those big mac type buttons where mum or whoever would record a certain phrase with their own voice to speak whenever I pressed the button. Believe it or not I refused to use these, I wonder why.

I had a bob the builder game where I had to press buttons which were about the size of a key on a DV4 which I did really well at and learned how to isolate one finger in order to push a button. This is how mum knew I could access a communication device using my hand.

Mum went to a course with my speechie and o t at the time on how to program the DV4 and mum decided she could program the device so they organised a trial and mum programmed a few things and without being taught I learned where everything was and could have appropriate conversations. Soon after the trial, I had a device ordered for me and I received my own DV4 which would see me through the whole of primary school.

I was originally using only 40 cells on this, but switched to 60 after a few years. I've been told the story about the first time I put a sentence together by myself, we were running late for school, and I typed I nate you mum, it was supposed to be hate, but, you know, I was five. Absolutely nothing has changed there, except my literacy. While communicating through the DV4 was really slow and tedious because I had to spell everything letter by letter, and the voice was crap, I loved that device every day for about 7 years. I remember

the soft resets it used to force intermittently, and the almost constant freezing, I still loved that device. It was the first slice of independence I'd ever been given. I could talk for myself, use the computer and even control the tv for the first time.

I used the DV4 for all of primary school, and in the younger years, almost everyone around me knew how to program it. Every time I needed something new either my mum or my aide at school would program exactly what I needed. It really was a great device, for the time, it was used in many school plays and assemblies. I did everything my peers did.

Today, I want to cover a topic which I am really passionate about but a lot of people shy away from. Minspeak, my second love, after Boccia. It's not talked about as much as it should be, because it scares a lot of people. I can even hear a few people cringe as I say the word through my computer screen. I get it, Eight years ago Minspeak scared the crap out of me too.

When I say I am really passionate about Minspeak, I'm talking really really passionate. I'm even trying to decide on an icon sequence to get tattooed on myself, after the bracelet of Boccia balls I've been planning on getting since I was about fourteen. I've even started getting myself jobs working with Minspeak, that's how much I love it. Without blowing my own trumpet too much this early into the night, I should probably also mention that I'm now the best Minspeak user in the country, and some people call me the next Bruce Baker, so that must say something about the rest of this speech.

I like to describe Minspeak as its own language within itself, a language which not many people know about or speak, so to say. It has its own rules and tricks which mean different things, it's got many complexities to learn, but it's no different than learning English. You're just learning icon sequences instead of words. With a lot of practice and some time, you can master it pretty quickly and easily, which is pretty much life changing once you do.

When I was going into year six I had to get a new device. This was when I was introduced to the wonderful Minspeak. After talking to a few of my friends from Boccia about the benefits of Minspeak, I decided that this was the way to go. Although, at the time it was a whole bunch of pictures which was somehow going to replace my letter by letter keyboard. I had no idea where anything was or what any of the pictures meant. Other than a few sessions with my speechie at the time and the occasional help from my Boccia friends, I had absolutely no one to help me learn this new language. Luckily mum encouraged me to explore where everything was, and when I got really stuck, look up the word I needed through the icon tutor.

I have to make it known right now that the only things I was actually taught about Minspeak, meaning that I didn't have to work them out myself, was where to find basic words like pronouns and prepositions, and colours, of course. For some reason, colours are always one of the first set of words we are taught. As an eleven year old who was about to start high school, colours were very much the words I had to learn straight away, of course.

I was also taught that once I learned an icon sequence, it would never change, and that it could be reversed depending on the order I needed the words. The rest, I just explored and

eventually remembered where everything was. In the beginning, I would find ways to relate the icons together in order to remember where the word I wanted was. It stopped being scary within a matter of months and started to become quicker and easier to get messages out, needing much less physical effort to say everything.

I'll admit that Minspeak is really daunting for the first little bit. Of course it is, it's a lot of keys to learn and at first sight it's overwhelming, but that doesn't mean that we shouldn't allow people to at least try it. Even though I think Minspeak is pretty much superior to every other communication program out there, therefore everyone should use it, and nothing else needs to even exist, I understand it might not work for some people. But I would like to think that everyone at least gets shown Minspeak because of the many benefits it has. And ideally one day it will get at least shown to everyone.

I haven't always loved Minspeak, of course. When I was first starting out on it, I hated it. The buttons were smaller than the 60 keys I'd used for years, and there were a hell of a lot more buttons to use and nothing made sense. I couldn't just type words like I used to, I had to figure out where to find them, which was a reasonably new concept for me. Sure, I'd used the gateway program on the DV4 for a few years on and off, but in comparison, that was nothing like Minspeak. But rather than refusing to learn it, I slowly started to warm to it as I explored it and learned how much faster it was. Mum also kept encouraging me to keep learning it and keep playing around with it, which kind of kept me from giving up

I have used the 144 key version of Minspeak since day one, there was no need to move me through every version of Minspeak. In fact, had they tried that with me, they would have been kicked out of my house pretty quickly, if not by my mother, by the Ten or eleven year old me. Apparently I was still scary back then.

A lot of people assume that the full version of Minspeak is overwhelming, and they're not wrong. It's scary to look at for the first time, when you're used to seeing a much smaller number of keys, all of which you understood. But the biggest selling points of Minspeak is that it's much faster to use and relies pretty much solely on muscle memory and not much else, right? No word is more than five key presses away, making it really freakishly quick to get sentences out, and things never move. Sure, you might add things which you need to learn and remember where they are, but nothing else moves, ever.

The words I learned seven years ago are in the exact same places today. Now, I have never played around with the other versions of Minspeak, even though I have plans to, but if the 144 version of Minspeak offers over 8000 already programmed words and phrases within just a few key presses, I don't see any reason to use anything else. And I don't think I'll even be caught dead using anything else. The day someone thinks they've found something better than Minspeak, please let me know and I'll be happy to be the judge of that.

When I was first starting out on Minspeak, I had a few mentors who would tell me almost every reason why I should switch to it, and I would watch these people communicate whenever I was around them, and they were much quicker than I was. Mum and I would both ask these people questions about Minspeak and they would answer them honestly. Without these people I probably would have been less likely to have chosen to switch to

Minspeak because that was a huge decision to make at like nine years old. If I was left to make that decision myself, I would have probably just gotten whatever the newest DynaVox was at the time.

Now, I'm becoming old enough to become a mentor myself, and that's pretty exciting to think about because I am going to eventually change the life of a few people, like these women did for me. I could one day be one of the reasons someone uses Minspeak, even years after I've met them, and that's a pretty cool thing to think about.

Last year, I completed my HSC, including a 6000 word personal interest project, which is about as long as this speech, using Minspeak. Had I used any other communication program, that would have been a hell of a lot more work than it was or it had to be. I also had to write essays within two to three hours which were about 400 to 1000 words which would have been pretty well impossible using anything else. I was already pushed for time even though I can type reasonably quickly and easily using Minspeak. Imagine if I had to use something else which wasn't as fast or didn't give me access to as much vocabulary as this does. It would have been impossible to complete anything on time, or I would have just had to procrastinate a lot less, which really wouldn't have happened.

As Minspeak allows me to type really easily and quickly, and I like writing, I've done a lot of public speaking over the years, like I am today. Minspeak means I can write speeches and whatever else I'm writing with not a lot of effort and in a reasonably short amount of time. The reason I feel this is important to talk about today is to show how efficient Minspeak really is.

When I was little and using my letter by letter keyboard, writing speeches and stories used to take a really long time, luckily, nothing I had to write back then had to be really long so I could write pieces I knew I could finish, which were maybe 150-200 Words long. Now I've finished school, and considering getting back into writing, I have to write much longer pieces, by a deadline and using Minspeak makes this pretty easy because of how fast I can get words out.

What used to take me a few hours to write as a kid, now takes maybe half an hour, which is a huge difference and makes everything so much better. Now, think about how fast I can write a paragraph or two and consider how much faster I am during conversations, instead of taking five minutes to write one sentence.

Now, I love thinking logically, I love when things make sense One of the things I like most about Minspeak is that the words are located in reasonably logical places, which means that my logical tendencies are pleased. You can usually find the word you want by using the pictures which you would logically relate together to get to that word. Of course, there are a few words that I don't use very often which I think are in ridiculous places, but I can find them with a bit of searching if I've forgotten where they are. With a lot of the other communication programs I've heard about and going from some of what occasionally happened when I had my dv4, not many other programs stay exactly the same for pretty much ever.

After a while of learning how to type using Minspeak, I even taught myself how to add words into Minspeak, as well as combining words together to get any word I want, without using the keyboard. Admittedly, I was sort of forced to learn the programming side of things after about twelve months of realizing mum was pretty much never going to program the page of swear words I needed or anything else other than the computer mouse I begged her to program so I didn't have to use the stupid mouse which comes in Minspeak and the TV remote.

To say I know almost everything about Minspeak is correct, except some of the more complex programming, which I outsource to someone who knows more than I do, who I allow to touch the programming of my device, which is only two other people in the whole world, both of which are still reasonably new in my life. Yeah, basically no one is allowed to even touch the screen of my device unless they have permission or I will karate chop them, and if they were to try to figure out how to program it, I don't know what I'd do but it wouldn't be good.

The other night I got into a pretty stupid argument with my sister, started off arguing about which one of us got the other into a T V show we both like and ended up GOD knows where. It was getting pretty late at night, mum wanted to get me into bed, and I think I had to go to Boccia for two days the next morning, so you can imagine how short our argument had to be. Yet, we still argued because we're sisters and there was no way she was getting the credit she was trying to get. While my arguments took a pretty long time to write, to the point where I'd forgotten one of the arguments I wanted to make while I was typing out another argument, I was still getting my arguments out a lot quicker than I would have if I was using anything else, because I had most of the vocabulary I had to use at my fingertips, literally. If arguing with my sister is not one of the situations where using Minspeak is really functional, I don't know what is. I can say anything I want with minimal effort and time taken, a lot less than if I was still typing everything letter by letter.

I'll let you all in on a little secret. Some of my Minspeak friends and I hold competitions with each other every now and then where we have to use Minspeak without the keyboard page for as long as we can, usually over a period of twenty-four hours or a weekend. Every time we have to use the keyboard, the person needs to start the challenge again, while the others usually brag about not having to start over. These weekends are always a lot of fun trying to say as much as we can using only what we have programmed, plus prediction.

There's three of us in this group, all of us using the 144 version of Minspeak. Every time we do this challenge I am always amazed by the words I can get out using Minspeak compared to the others. Of course, I love both of these ladies a lot, but my ability to mix and match words together to get most of the words I need comes as a great advantage during these challenges. It also shows how much I think differently to the others when it comes to putting sentences together with Minspeak in terms of structuring sentences so I don't have to use the keyboard or being able to combine things together to get the word I need.

These challenges, however, are not necessarily designed to prove that any of us are better at using Minspeak than anybody else, although, we do get pretty competitive when it comes

to not having to start over again. No, these challenges show each of us where we need to program vocabulary in order to make ourselves faster and more efficient. Every time we force ourselves not to use the keyboard, we realize how much we have to use it and what words us maybe should have programmed a long time ago.

When it comes to people using any sort of AAC, it is always thought that it is best for someone in that person's circle to know the system being used, presumably for programming purposes or modelling. As I said before, instead of having somebody show me where the word was, I would just use the icon tutor to learn where it was. I was also given a lot of time and space to babble and figure out where everything was and remember everything. For me, once I switched to Minspeak, absolutely no one could use my device because no one knew how to find anything. I remember when my sister used to use my device when I would get out of my chair. Every time she was using it and I got my device back, other than a stupid message in the text area, the keyboard page was always open for simple words.

So, whenever people discuss the fact that people need to know the communication program being used, I have issues with this. I know Minspeak inside and out, sure it'd be nice if the people around me at least knew the basics so they could understand how my device works, but they don't have to. I know what I'm doing and that's about all that matters. Plus, it's kind of great when people I see every day say they've still got no idea how I use my device.

Up until a little over twelve months ago, I was the only person in my life who knew anything about Minspeak, meaning that I had to work out everything I know by myself. You can imagine how excited I was when I met my current speechie who I could actually ask questions about Minspeak and get decent answers. Not that I needed much help after six years but it was still awesome to throw out technical questions and terms and have someone understand most of what I was saying. I had someone who knew at least something about programming which I'd never had before.

Even though I went a long time without anybody else who knew much about Minspeak, if anything, and kind of got used to secretly becoming a genius at it all by myself, once I actually found someone who knew Minspeak almost as much as I did was kind of amazing. Of course, I had friends of many years who also used Minspeak to communicate and knew the basics really well, but as I became better and better at both communicating with Minspeak and programming, I started realizing that I was jumping way ahead of everybody else with the skills I was gaining just by trying different things and exploring the menus. These friends were still asking how to do basic things while I was always trying to figure out ways I could make Minspeak just a tiny bit better or more efficient.

Mind you, I'm still pretty slack when it comes to programming words, but hey, how am I going to program a word in while I'm in the middle of a conversation when it first becomes apparent I need that word? I haven't worked out a way to remember what I need to program either so it just never gets done. And that's okay, because one day I'll be talking to someone who knows AAC and they'll basically tell me to sort myself out and program that word right there and then.

While I'm on the subject of programming, a month ago, while I was writing this speech actually, I figured out how to add my own icon sequences instead of programming words into pages I'd made myself, or within already made icon sequences. To say I was excited about that is an understatement, I was almost over the moon.

After seven years of using Minspeak I had just opened up the door to grow the vocabulary I have access to by a ridiculous amount, and that was pretty exciting. Turns out, everyone figured out how to do this a long time ago and I was way behind.

Of course, I don't use Minspeak exclusively without anything else, I've programmed an activity row with prediction which helps speed up with the typing of words both programmed and not programmed. I can access this activity row from just about anywhere in Minspeak with just a press of a button. Whenever I'm talking to someone or writing long pieces of text, I open this activity, and while it doesn't help with a lot because it doesn't always predict what I want, it does help with some extent. It might save me having to use the keyboard to finish a word I've started to put together using Minspeak, which is awesome and surprisingly speeds things up a lot if it decides to show the right word.

There are a lot of ways to customize Minspeak to make it quicker and easier for someone to use, which I think a lot of people don't think about. The only things I've programmed is of course the prediction and words I use a lot, but I've seen people who have moved icons and all kinds of things to make Minspeak what's best for them. I think people have it in their heads that they can't customize Minspeak that it has to stay sort of how it comes. It doesn't.

One of my friends from Boccia who I've started to see pretty much weekly has moved icons to weird and wonderful places, probably for access reasons as she uses eye gaze. But almost anything about Minspeak can be changed with some programming, except already made icon sequences unless you have a lot of time on your hands and a hell of a lot more patience than I do. While Minspeak was mostly designed to stay the same, if something doesn't work for someone, play around with it and see what you can change. I'm still playing with mine after seven years, and will probably never stop playing. That's one of the great things about Minspeak, while it has a structure and comes almost ready to use, you can always make changes.

The other day I got one of my support workers to try to use my device to say anything he wanted, mostly just so I could tease him for a few minutes, but partly because he's known about this speech for a few months and I figured he should probably know what I've been going on about. The device was still on my chair so I could laugh at him even more than I could have otherwise, but I was also able to show him where to find things, I must have been feeling really nice for some reason. Although, the sentence he decided to write had a few words he had to use the keyboard for anyway, which I thought was pretty funny, he did get to use Minspeak for a few words.

While it was absolutely hilarious to watch, hilarious enough that if I could have videoed it I would have, it was a good experience for both of us, he's only been around communication devices for about six months and he was the one I roped into helping get my head around how I was going to finish this speech on time, and I've never really had any of the people

around me come and experience my device, so it was a new experience for me. It kind of made me think about whether me telling people they don't need to know my device was the right thing to do. Maybe they don't need to know everything about Minspeak, but at least allowing them to have a go to understand it, rather than just listening to me trying to explain it.

While I didn't need or have a lot of help while I was learning Minspeak, there are so many ways you or someone else can help to support someone to learn Minspeak. I didn't need any of these so I'm kind of just going off what I've been talking to a few people about, but we'll see how we go.

One of the ways that was really recommended during these conversations was the idea of focusing on the top ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty core words and incorporating these into activities, as well as just modelling them like I'm guessing that you usually would in any other communication program.

The idea is to not only repeatedly model these words, but to also incorporate them into fun and meaningful activities so that the words develop meaning to the person. As eighty per cent of everything we ever say is made up of the same 400 words, you are teaching basically where to find the majority of everything they are going to say. This repeated exposure of where to find all of these important words will eventually mean that the person will remember where to find all of these words themselves. At first, this Method sounded ridiculous to me because I know there was no way I would have needed this nor anyway anyone around me would have done it, once the logic was explained to me behind this Method, it kind of made sense.

Once you see something repeated over and over, you are going to eventually remember it, and because Minspeak is something they are going to use all the time, hopefully, it is going to be pretty much impossible to completely forget where something is. Even if they do forget where a word is sometimes, that's more than okay, I forget where things are on Minspeak sometimes, I'm sure everyone else does too. It's an enormous program, there is no way they are going to remember how to find everything one hundred percent of the time.

To help with the idea of practicing core words, the NuVoice pass software can be downloaded on to another computer, allowing the communication partner or whoever to explore a simulation of the program being used and find the words themselves. I think you can even import a copy of the person's vocabulary so you can explore the exact same programming the person is using on their device. The software also allows someone to create cheat sheets on where to find the words being focused on and print them out to help however they think is best.

Learning Minspeak is a lot of work, I can't deny that, it's a huge thing to undertake. It's like learning any other language and takes a lot of practice to get the hang of, and at times it can be one of the most frustrating things ever. I hated learning Minspeak, hated it without a doubt, and at times all I wanted to do was go into the keyboard page and never leave. The best way to help someone learn Minspeak is to be patient with them while they are

composing whatever they are going to say, without jumping in straight away to help them find the word they want or predict what they are going to say. Of course, if they are really stuck, you can help them figure out where the word is, but don't try to finish the sentence for them. Also, just being a good communication partner and waiting while they type goes a long way while someone is still learning and getting used to Minspeak.

While I was learning Minspeak, all of my communication partners were patent enough to let me take my time to find words and allowed me to be slower than usual. While none of them waited while I typed, because hey, they're never going to change, they were used to me taking about five months to write a sentence. All right, that's a slight exaggeration. Point is, while learning Minspeak, even I needed people to be somewhat patent so I could figure out where things were, and that went a long way as I grew more confident in using Minspeak.

A tiny bit of patience and allowing someone to figure out where words are without jumping in to predict what they are going to say helps enormously while learning Minspeak. While learning Minspeak, communication partners should also create opportunities for the person to communicate using Minspeak by engaging them in conversation and asking a lot of open ended questions so the person is encouraged to explore Minspeak and remember where words are.

When I was still learning Minspeak, I used to say which icon I had to use next to get the word I wanted, kind of like rope learning. As I was typing the words I was telling myself what pictures I had to put together, such as, finger, book and action man gives me the word pass, for example. Not sure why I chose that word, but you get the idea. For some people, they make up stories as to how the pictures make the word, the finger brings you to all the doing words, then you might be passing a book to someone, and anything to do with the action man is a verb and therefore it must be a good thing, right? Whenever I'm really tired or nervous I still go through the icons in my head for some reason, probably so I can keep track of what I'm doing and don't end up saying something really weird instead of what I'm wanting to say.

Minspeak was the best long term decision I've ever made, it's allowed me to communicate everything I've wanted to say for the last eight years and still does everything I need now I'm becoming an adult, and I don't think it will ever stop meeting my needs. I've loved Minspeak for about seven years and I'll probably always love it.

If you're considering the switch, either for yourself or someone you know, please give it the best shot you can because it really does change your life and makes everything so much easier. I know it's scary to get your head around at first, but it will get really easy after awhile and I don't think you'll ever regret it. I don't.