



Lucas Wittenbach, 4, shares a laugh with speech-language student Nicole Feenstra as the two work on building Wittenbach's communication skills. (Submitted photo)

MARY FREE BED

Augmentative Communication provides options for speech

Providing a voice

By Tricia Boot

Four-year-old Lucas Wittenbach is like most kids his age. He loves Peppa Pig and Barney and spending time outdoors.

He's strong-willed. He thinks fart noises are funny. And while Lucas can't verbalize his thoughts and feelings, he loves interacting and communicating with people.

"He's a social butterfly," said Lucas' mom, Jenni Wittenbach, during a recent appointment with Melissa Hoffmann, a speech-language pathologist and assistive technology professional at Mary Free Bed Rehabilitation Hospital.

Born with congenital heart disease, at seven months old Lucas survived a severe stroke that impacted his motor abilities, including his speech. When he was nine months old, Lucas began regular appointments for outpatient rehabilitation at Mary Free Bed.

Earlier this year, Augmentative Communication was added to his therapy routine.

In this specialized program, a speech-language therapist and occupational therapist match patients of all ages with alternative or supplementary options to verbal communication.

Options run the gamut from no-tech (pictures and alphabet boards) to low- and high-tech, including voice-enabled devices that can be controlled by eyegaze, touchscreen, switch/button scanning and head-worn mouse.

An on-site "loan closet" allows patients to test-drive some types of equipment.

Hoffmann said the program helps provide a voice for individuals with diagnoses or conditions

IF YOU GO

TALKING WITH TECH

What: Free, ongoing opportunity for kids of all ages to interact with peers who also use communication devices (aka "communicators"). Mary Free Bed therapists and Kent Intermediate School District professionals also facilitate themed discussions for parents/caregivers.

When: 4-5 pm, Wednesday; winter and spring dates to be determined

Where: Kent Intermediate School District, Educational Services Center Building (parking lot 11), 2930 Knapp St. NE, Grand Rapids

RSVP: maryfreebed.com/rehabilitation/augmentative-communication/

that can include amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), autism, stroke, cerebral palsy, Rett syndrome, muscular dystrophy, multiple sclerosis, traumatic brain injury and Down syndrome.

During a recent appointment at Mary Free Bed, Hoffmann and Calvin College speech-language student Nicole Feenstra worked with Lucas on his Tobii DynaVox I-12, a communicator that looks similar to a computer tablet. Lucas uses a combination of eye gaze and a foot-controlled button to make his on-screen selections, voicing everything from practical requests ("Water, please") to more playful interactions ("Tickle my feet!").

"This is the first time Lucas has been able to choose the toy he gets to play with," Jenni Wittenbach said.

She plans to add a screen with images of Lucas' classmates so he can invite specific friends to play with him.

Customized and pre-programmed games engage Lucas'

attention, while reinforcing communication and technical skills.

For example, the "fart game" — smiling clouds that make flatulent sounds when selected — teaches Lucas about cause and effect (while eliciting an infectious giggle).

Other applications aid in teaching numbers, colors and vocabulary.

"We're also working on literacy," Hoffmann said. "Only 30 percent of people who use communication devices are literate."

Hoffmann said the Augmentative Communication program helps empower a wide variety of people.

"You have the 5-year-old who, for the first time, is able to say, 'I love you' to his mom. Or the 50-year-old man with cerebral palsy whose parents can understand him, but who needs to start preparing for what happens when they're no longer around to help him communicate.

"There are people who program their devices to call a spouse in case of an emergency."

Augmentative communication devices can be pivotal in helping people to pursue educational and professional goals.

"I know people who've used them to attend college or work in business," Hoffman said.

Jenni Wittenbach is hopeful for Lucas' opportunities with communication technology.

His slow-but-steady progress has helped the staff at his preschool — where he's part of the general education program — to more accurately understand his potential.

"They thought I was crazy when I told them that he knows his colors. They're amazed at the higher order of questions he can answer," Jenni Wittenbach said.

"Before, he had no way to tell us what he knew."