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Leon Valsechi

## Nonprofit gives kids with communication disorders a voice

February 24, 2017

*Centre Daily Times*



*Vincent Tannehill, 6, checks out his new communication device he received from Variety the Children's Charity on Friday.  
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BELLEFONTE – Three Centre County children who are diagnosed with communication disorders were given electronic devices on Friday that give them the ability to break the barrier they struggle with every day.

Variety, a children's charity organization based in Pittsburgh, presented the devices to the children and their parents at the YMCA of Centre County. In 2012, the nonprofit began providing disabled children with specialty bikes and strollers. In 2014, after hearing from families about the need for communication devices outside of school, Variety decided to address the need.

Charles LaVallee, Variety CEO, said it's great that children with disorders have access to communication devices in school, but oftentimes the device is shared and remains in school at the end of the day.

“The kids have a voice when they’re in school, but they can’t communicate with mom or dad or grandpa at home,” LaVallee said. “The kids have to turn their voices off at 2:20 p.m. — that didn’t make sense to us. Kids need to have a voice like we all do.”

The organization developed custom protective cases for iPads and loaded the devices with voice communication apps. The apps allow children to express basic needs by touching prompts on the screen, LaVallee said. The words and phrases are spoken by an artificial child-like voice from the iPad.

Parents also have the ability to customize the options for their children. Pictures of family members, pets or objects in the home accompanied by a recording of a parent speaking the words or phrases can be loaded onto the iPad.

Cynthia Stevens’s adopted 10-year-old daughter, Hope, was born prematurely with gastroschisis and suffered brain damage from complications. As a result, her vocabulary is limited to about 20 basic words, Stevens said.



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After Hope began playing with the device, her eyes grew big behind her black- and pink-framed glasses and she smiled as she realized the possibilities.

“This is going to change her life, it’s as simple as that,” Stevens said. “She’s going to be able to come home and communicate with me.”

Six-year-old Vincent Tannehill, who has autism, was also given an iPad. His mother, Berlyn Tannehill, said he has never been able to verbalize his needs, and he often smacks his forehead out of frustration

While Vincent was waiting for his iPad, he smacked his head several times. The frustration with the inability to verbalize his thoughts to his mom was clear, but after LaVallee handed him the device, Vincent’s hands relaxed. He gently grasped the iPad and just as Hope did a few minutes earlier, Vincent lit the room with a bright smile as he poked the screen.

Tannehill realized the possibilities in her son’s hands, but her motherly instincts kicked in as she shared her hopes for a future with the device.

“I want him to be able to tell me that he wants to go outside and play on the swing, and if he falls off, I want him to be able to tell me he’s hurt,” Tannehill said. “I just want to be able to know what he’s thinking.”



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Variety often receives calls praising the device’s effectiveness, LaVallee said, but recently he received a call from a family that provided him with an outcome he hadn’t considered.

The mother told LaVallee that one morning she asked her daughter what she wanted for breakfast. Her daughter tapped the iPad to say “potato chips and Pepsi.” She responded with a stern no, but her daughter duplicated the request with a smile. The two joked for a few minutes as a proper breakfast was prepared, according to LaVallee.

“I was so focused on the device being able to communicate pain, bathroom and other necessities, but I didn’t think a daughter was going to use it to kid her mother,” LaVallee said. “Obviously we want children to communicate the basics, but we want every child to have these moments with their families.”

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