



## **Assent as a Human Right: Interdisciplinary Applications for Ethical, Compassionate Care**

**A webinar presented by Dr. Noor Syed on June 25, 2026.**

**Kimberly Ha**

And now, without further ado, I'm pleased to introduce today's speaker, Dr. Noor Syed.

Dr. Noor Syed is an Associate Professor of ABA and Founding Director of CAARES at SUNY Empire State University.

She also serves as a turban director of autism advocacy, advancing neurodiversity affirming initiatives across the university.

Dr. Syed directs Anderson Center International as president of NICE ABBA, and serves on the ABA Ethics Hotline and OAR Scientific Council.

Her work is informed by both professional and lived experience. With that, I'll turn it over to you, Noor. Take it away.

**Noor Syed**

00:02:26

Thanks, Kim. Thanks, Kristen. Hi, everybody! Happy Thursday! If you're here and watching live, thank you so much for being here and for having me.

I'm honored to be able to chat with all of us today about assent, so it's just... it's just a joy.

Forgive me if you see me looking over, you're on my split screen, and I want to keep an eye on the chat and the Q&A, so please feel free to use both as much as you'd like, as much as you'd feel comfortable. For those who might want to chat a little bit more after, I'll share my email, or if you're watching later, please feel free to contact me anytime.

Okay, so with that, we'll dive in.

And I think I'll just take a moment to say that I'm kind of nervous to, I always am for speaking, but also this, like, I really want to learn with you all about this content, so I incredibly welcome your perspectives, your thoughts, what resonates, what might not. I think that all of us working together makes things so much better for the learners that we support.

So, again, my thanks, and we'll jump right in.

So firstly, I want to just extend my sincerest appreciation to everybody who is on this call, now or later, for all that you do, for the folks that we have the honor to work with, care for, support.



You, you make the world a better place, so... please know that the work that you do is just extraordinarily appreciated.

All right, so what we're hoping to talk about today, as you might have seen, is to discuss assent, assent withdrawal, dissent, and how to differentiate those from things like compliance.

We'll talk a little bit about individualized assent and dissent protocols, modifying the environment to support learner autonomy, and how to engage in community-informed practices that can help, hopefully, move this work forward.

So just stating that a little bit of a different way, and so you have a sense of the flow for today, we'll, start with foundations.

We'll dive more deeply into recognizing assent, and we have some case presentations that I'll be really interested to hear your thoughts and perspective on. We'll talk a bit about what it... it might look like to support meaningful participation.

Something I love is that we'll go into strategic questioning and decision making, and then think about next steps.

Okay, so what is assent? And I have a sense that one or more folks, probably quite a few folks, on this call have a background or may have a background in it, but thought it was really helpful for me, to sort of look through some of the definitions, and I found that to be grounding as I was thinking about the content and the presentation today.

So, I am going to just read some of this out loud for those for whom this would be helpful, so that we can think about those foundations and those definitions as we move forward.

So informed consent, which I like to specify, and really, you know, kind of differentiate that, or just make it really clear when we talk about consent, that what, I really want for us to consider here is informed consent.

So, informed consent, and kindly note that these definitions have been formed by the literature that you see. Happy to share any and all, and additional resources as well, but that the emphases that you see here, have been added by myself.

So, informed consent, legally valid and informed permission to participate in services and other activities. So, that informed consent process, again, as many of us may have a background in, requires adequate information, understanding, and voluntary agreement.

Informed consent is an ongoing process and can be withdrawn.

Assent is an individual's agreement or willingness to participate as communicated through vocal and or non-vocal behavior. It's individualized, ongoing, and can be expressed through words, actions, behaviors, engagement, and many other... and take on many other communication forms.

Something I want to emphasize additionally is that the absence of objection does not necessarily indicate assent, according to the literature.



Dissent, is any communication that indicates refusal, disagreement, discomfort, or unwillingness to participate.

And that can be expressed vocally or non-vocally, and it's important to interpret that within the context of the individual's communication repertoire and environment. And we're going to talk a lot more about what that context could look like and what that might mean in just a few minutes.

Assent withdrawal is a change in behavior that indicates that an individual is no longer willing, wants to, wishes to participate in an activity, interaction, etc. after they have demonstrated assent.

Assent withdrawal can occur at any point, and is viewed, of course, as assent is, as an ongoing communication process, rather than a one-time event.

Compliance, on the other hand, refers to... or compliance is the engagement in a requested activity, instruction, or expectation.

It really refers to the behavior that's occurring in response to a request or a demand, but it does not necessarily indicate that the learner is demonstrating assent. That they're comfortable, or that they're meaningfully participating in the interaction, in the activity, and so on.

So we'll give just a second for everyone to glance through that.

And what I want to really emphasize, or further emphasize, is that informed consent, assent, dissent, and assent withdrawal really relate to an individual's agreement or willingness to participate.

Compliance, on the other hand, only refers to whether or not participation occurred. So, participation alone does not necessarily indicate assent.

And again, things that I think folks on this call are probably really familiar with, but something that I think is just so important to kind of share out, not only amongst ourselves, but certainly with those that we have the privilege to supervise, train, and work with.

So, what I want to propose is this, and certainly not the first to propose this, but that assent is a process.

It really emerges through that interaction of how the participant, and we'll talk more about this, but, you know, thinking about self-determination, quality of life, communication, understanding how the learner expresses their wants, needs, and preferences, and context, the environment under which these requests are occurring.

Those are incredibly important as well. Putting that... putting that all together is that we look at, again, assent as ways to meaningfully participate, ways that our learners are meaningfully engaging with the interactions, engaging with the activities, and so on. And of course, again, you know, what we have really sort of seen is that it's ongoing and dynamic.



Assent isn't a one-time event, right? Demonstrating assent at the beginning of an interaction, for example, does not necessarily mean that assent is occurring throughout the interaction, and it can certainly change over time and across situations.

Let's dive into some misconceptions that literature has suggested that we will hear and see when it comes to assent. So, misconception number one that we wanted to highlight here is that compliance equals assent. It does not.

Compliance does not equal assent, and that's just something that I feel like is so important. We have the honor to work with students at Empire State University, and that's something that we really, really emphasize, is that compliance, right, participating in an activity does not necessarily equal assent.

So, participating, again, doesn't demonstrate willingness or agreement.

Misconception number two, that assent is only possible for those who identify as speakers.

That is absolutely a myth, it's a misconception. Assent and dissent, again, as many of us probably have a background in and are aware, can be communicated in many, many different ways. It can be through vocal verbal behavior, speech, if someone is a speaker.

It can be through alternative augmentative communication, or AAC devices, through different observable behaviors, such as affect, body language. It could also be some physiological responses. There might be private events, and other forms of communication.

Another misconception that I wanted to touch on today, and I really, truly welcome thoughts, perspectives, feedback, either now or after thinking about this, reflecting a little bit more, I think that dialogue very much moves us forward.

But a third misconception that I wanted to bring to us is that assent means learners decide everything.

And I want to, say that instead of considering it as that learners decide everything, instead, assent, what I want to propose, involves meaningful participation in decision making, but doesn't necessarily, mean unlimited choice or complete control over all decisions.

So, some examples of that that I have, that I talk about, and then one that I'll share that I've actually seen.

But when I'm working with a learner, and they might be indicating that they are going to run into a heavily trafficked street. That is one situation where, they might not be assenting to me stopping them, but my role is to keep them safe.

So in that case, right, while unfortunately I am not able to really honor that choice of moving into the... of running into the street, I am... keeping them safe.

Right, so it's not unlimited choice or complete control.



Another example that I wanted to share as I was, you know, really thinking about this slide, particularly, and, you know, what we consider with assent, is a really great example, I think, that a student, a former student, sort of brought to me.

And this student was, on an interdisciplinary team and was working with a learner, who really just did not want to leave the vestibule of the building. So this learner was served in a kind of a clinic-type setting, and really didn't want to leave the vestibule.

So, the team, you know, was really thinking about assent, which is amazing, and so they started bringing all of the learners' materials, all the things that they enjoyed, all the games, all the fun things to the vestibule.

And I wanted to say... and I shared with them how, firstly, amazing I thought that was, that they were really thinking about assent. But then thought that that was also a good opportunity to sort of shape and say, well, let's think about it. Like, we as humans often need to transition, right?

And maybe what we can do instead is help to teach that learner how fun other places in that clinic setting can be.

The playgrounds, the toys, all the great things that can happen there, so that we can sort of expand their community of reinforcers, expand the things that they enjoy, really teach them that there are fun things that could happen in different places, because the reality is that that learner probably will, at some point, need to transition.

They might have already needed to transition, and have experienced that.

So we're going to talk about more... we're going to talk more about this, in a few minutes, but really thinking about things like self-determination, advocacy, embedding choices, all comes into this assent, and thinking about how assent may not mean that we can, learners that are able to decide everything, we have to consider things like safety and so on, but it absolutely, I propose, involves meaningful participation in that decision making.

And again, welcome, welcome thoughts, questions, ideas.

And another misconception that we've talked about, already is that once assent is obtained, that it remains in effect. It is ongoing and can be withdrawn, changed, and vary per person, activities, context, at any time. So very much dynamic.

So, a few more misconceptions I wanted to share with you. Assent means that no expectations can be placed on learners.

I would ask us to reframe that and think instead about expectations, learning goals, and safety requirements that can coexist with efforts to obtain and maintain assent.

That dissent only matters when it's explicit or disruptive.



Instead, there can be subtle or emerging context-dependent indicators of dissent, and that's why it becomes so important, I think, for us to really develop individualized assent protocols, which we'll talk about again later on today. Because it's important that we honor that.

Another misconception, that assent is solely the learner's responsibility to communicate. Instead, we share responsibility for arranging environments, building trust, recognizing communication, and responding to those assent and dissent signals.

Assent is an all-or-nothing construct. Instead, we're framing that to essentially exist on a continuum. And again, you know, really just kind of driving home that idea that it can vary across activities, conditions, and points in time.

And lastly, that respecting assent means ending instruction whenever a learner objects. Instead, reframing it to respecting assent involves understanding the function of dissent, modifying conditions, supporting regulation, supporting and balancing autonomy, learning, and safety.

So now, I'd love to take a moment to ask you, and I... you might be able to pop into the chat, if not, I think you can use the Q&A, or absolutely, sort of take... please feel free to take a moment to kind of reflect to yourself and think about this.

I'd love to hear what are some indicators, that suggest or that you know demonstrate that a learner wants to participate, and then how might that answer change if the learner does not use spoken language?

Give everyone a moment to think about that.

Yes, absolutely, Caitlin. Leaning forward and looking at the materials, I think that can be a great assent indicator.

The learner smiles, it might change if the learner stops smiling. Garrett, I love that so, so much, and agree completely. Like, that is certainly contextual, it can change. Great example of assent, and then potentially assent withdrawal.

Laura, my learner makes choices on a... Laura, on a choice board to determine which of the available programs I want to work on first.

Love that. So much. I think we're going to talk about this more, but I just want to celebrate all of you, you know, to start, because those strength-based choices are so incredible in creating affirming environments and supporting autonomy, dignity, advocacy, all the amazing things.

Using speech language, absolutely, for some learners, definitely.

Hi, Christina! Learners reaching towards materials, yes, I think that's a really good example as well.

Thanks, Dana. Yeah, incredible. Thank you so much, and thanks, everyone, for, using the Q&A function rather than the chat.



Kristen, agree. Approaching materials can be, and we're actually going to talk a little bit about, like, how the same behavior can indicate assent or dissent, but generally speaking, I think that that is one indicator that may indicate a dissent.

And yeah, Karen, I agree completely. You know, it's... it's something, actually, a project that, colleagues and I are working on for... or... embeds indices of happiness as an assent indicator, and indices of happiness have actually been studied in the literature, and also, to me, make a lot of sense, right? Does the learner seem happy, right?

Because, you know, we talked a bit about meaningful participation, and that's such a powerful indicator of whether or not, yeah, absolutely, Karen, whether or not someone is engaged, and I just think so incredible of us to be aware of that.

So, I want to celebrate the literature that is looking at indices of happiness. I can also share a bunch of those with you too, because I think that's so important.

Yes, I appreciate that. Can you please talk about assent in very young children? Giving choices can be very helpful, but many times toddlers resist getting dressed, sitting in a high chair to eat, and other routines that are in their best interest. Is it appropriate to also look at assent, and what is developmentally appropriate?

I love that question so much. I'm gonna ask that we pin that question, if we can keep it up, because I absolutely want to get to that.

And, colleagues, some of what we talk about today might speak to it.

However, I welcome you to follow up, and I do want to make sure that I address that question directly. So, I'm going to pin that, if that's okay, and hold on to that question.

All right, so why does this conversation matter? Fundamental rights.

I want to thank my dear colleague, who's also working on the project, that we were talking about with indices of assent, or sorry, indices of happiness, for this slide.

So, the Communication Bill of Rights, fundamental communication rights that we all have, including, of course, learners that we have the honor to serve, and want to shout out ASHA, from whom this is... this is borrowed.

So, the right to refuse or reject, the right to express personal preferences and feelings. the right to make choices, the right to be treated with dignity and addressed with respect and courtesy, and the right to be addressed directly and not be spoken for or talked about in the third person while present, right?

Our fundamental communication rights. And Karen, I love that, that this is being cited, because we feel really strongly about that as well. So important.

And something to just think about is that, you know, we're, in the best way, I'm gonna say. I love that we are continuing to think about this and talk about this, but this isn't, I'm gonna venture to say that this concept, is



something that has been, you know, I think one that we have been talking about, in our service professions for a very long time, and that brings me joy.

But there's a great article by, Diane Bannerman and colleagues that was published in 1990 that I still think about, and we actually still share with our students. I think it's called something like, The Right to Eat Donuts and Take Too Many Naps, something like that, both of which I fully support.

And so it talks about how we teach skills while preserving choice, and the colleague put into the chat about some, like, for example, toddlers who might be might not want to get dressed.

There are some things that we do have to engage in, right? As people, we do have to get dressed, we do have to engage in those transitions, and so thinking about how we can support and teach those skills that you know, we do... that do, I would say, need to occur, while still embedding as much choice as possible, while still recognizing preferences.

So, I'm going to say some things that I feel sure that, you know, you've tried, but just some ideas to consider that, you know, for others is... everything from, like, do you want to get dressed before breakfast or after breakfast? Do you want to wear this shirt or that shirt? Or is there another shirt that you want to wear? We're actually going to talk about the choice-making as well.

So, while those seem small, and again, I feel quite sure that those are things that have been implemented, those little... they might seem little to us, but those little changes actually lead to so much autonomy and so much dignity for the... those that we have the honor to love and support.

So, thinking about some of those pieces.

How do we recognize preferences? How do we avoid making decisions without client input? And now, in 2026, again, that conversation is continuing. How do we recognize assent? How do we respond to assent withdrawal?

Something I... I love. How do we build autonomy-supportive environments? Assent-supportive environments?

And how do we ensure, do the best that we absolutely can to include autistic and neurodivergent voices in decision making?

And I'm going to digress a second to just say that, I wanted to include all of these resources and references, but I couldn't make this too long, so there are some really great articles that I didn't even cite here that talk about, you know, how we can support and include, so in addition to these, I should say, I'm happy to share any and all of those things.

So, we've, again, we've talked about assent.

Thinking about assent as meaningful participation, as we consider context, communication, the learner that we are supporting, all those incredible pieces.



And now, you know, what we want to talk about, is how to just go beyond that participation. We're going to dive, hopefully, into universal design and proactive approaches. But bearing in mind, as we do all of these things. Autonomy.

How can we best support meaningful choice? Right? Again, I really just appreciate this question and this example.

Other routines that are in their best interest. So let's say, like, hygiene skills. Again, all things that have likely been done, but just considering what time does somebody want to brush their teeth, or take a bath, or brush their hair?

What kind of toothbrush do they want to use? Are there toothbrushes that make it easier for them to brush their own teeth?

There are some, like, there are some great therapeutic tools, that I'm sure colleagues here have... know, or might want to recommend, or have used, that are a little bit easier to, let's say, grasp than the more traditional toothbrush.

What flavor of toothpaste? Are all things that, again, small... small, but really meaningful ways to embed choice, really ways to develop that autonomy and to support the dignity.

Always thinking collectively, right, across all of our fields. I'm honored to collaborate with everybody here on what are our responsibilities ethically, neuro-affirming practice, how do we understand communication?

I'm gonna talk more about that, we love that topic. And quality of life, what matters... what outcomes matter most, right? What are... what are we hoping to achieve? Also, yes, I'm really happy to share these slides, yes, absolutely.

So, what matters most, and I'm also going to ask us, and we'll talk about this, hopefully soon, realizing 30 minutes has gone by, but how we... how can we assess the outcomes of the decisions that we make so that we can add to our own learning history and continue to make decisions that are supportive of assent, meaningful participation, autonomy, quality of life, so on and so forth.

And then, incredibly importantly, how do we make these decisions together?

I'm gonna say things that I... I feel like OAR has always championed, so this is not novel or new at all, but I have... I feel like it just creates such a stronger environment, to be working on teams with all of you incredible humans, from all different fields and backgrounds.

It helps me think in ways that I didn't before, and so making those decisions together, I have found that is really in the best interest of our learners.

And so again, yes, absolutely, I'm super, super happy to share the slides.

Okay, so a few guiding principles that I want to share, and we're actually going to go back to this.

And again, these are things that we share with our students, so feel free, you know, anything that might resonate that you want to take and pass on, absolutely.



All behavior is communication.

Something else that we emphasize is that the ability to make choices or make decisions can be challenging for me if I'm dysregulated, and certainly for our learners if they are dysregulated. So bearing that in mind, so again, I keep coming back to this incredible question, but sometimes too many choices when I'm dysregulated can be difficult.

So, going back to that theme of context being important, thinking about context, and maybe in certain instances, it's easier for me to make a choice when I have two options. Personally, for me, when I'm dysregulated, that is easier.

If I am regulated, right, social-emotional wellness, then I can more easily make choices when I have a few different things to look through. So, all things to consider.

Oh, thank you, Lee. Lee says great lecture, and as a pediatric dentist and doctor who specialize in special needs population, or as they say in Dubai, people of determination, thank you for all that you do, love that so much, and I really want to super borrow people of determination, so thank you, Lee.

My question is from your perspective. I love what you say, but sometimes parents are struggling with so many other issues that teeth and oral health fall to the back of the line. How would you address this issue and its importance, and how do we get the child from your toolbox to help us in the long run and the patient.

Lee, I'm not entirely sure about that last part of the question, so please feel free to kind of clarify.

But it's, you know, thinking again about the question, very similar, or not similar, forgive me, but talking about things like how to support in those instances and challenges.

I would love... this is one, actually, an area where I'd love to pick your brain, I'm wondering, not having a background in pediatric... pediatric dentistry whatsoever, but, I'm wondering if there are strategies or tools that are lower response efforts that we can offer as choices for things like oral health, because we know parents experience so, so much.

They are there day-to-day, every day, saying all things that we know, and it can just seem like another task demand, just another thing that's difficult.

So, what I would... I think what I would do there, or one of the first things I think I would think about, not knowing all the context, is, how do I create an environment that is as supportive for the family, the learner, and the caregivers as possible.

So, for example, like, is there something that can be used in place of a non-preferred toothbrush? Or is there a time in the day when it might not be, like, perfectly ideal to brush teeth, that the parents say, okay, like, I think I can do it during this time.

And then we can work on sort of shaping that. Let's say, alright, thank you so much for brushing teeth at this time. You know, it actually might be even more beneficial after dinner.



And once we've sort of built up that confidence for the family, it's like, hey, it's okay, you know, giving these choices, supporting, offering these different options.

I'm seeing that my child wants to brush their teeth a little bit more often, then we're helping that... we're kind of building confidence for the parents as well. And then it might be, okay, like, it might not be as big of a lift to brush teeth after dinner.

Again, these are, you know, highly contextual, all things that may have been tried may not be applicable, to this family, to this learner, but just a few things I think about, and sort of how do we create an appetitive environment as much as we possibly can that can support?

I find that when we do that, it then becomes a little bit easier, like, we need fewer sort of reactive strategies, if you will, although those are important, too.

You know, giving the family guidance on what to do, but it's just they're so exhausted, and the learner's having a really tough time, but those universal proactive approaches, I find, can be really beneficial and help create an environment that's more likely to support assent.

So, please feel free to follow up, push back. I love, love, love all the feedback. I think it helps me tremendously, and thank you again for the work that you do.

Okay, I'm gonna, Lee, thank you, I'm gonna move just for the interest of time, but I definitely want to pin, the comment and come back.

So, autonomy includes... sorry, coming back to here. Autonomy includes saying no, or even an unclear no. A colleague put in the chat, like, sometimes a smile, but then the smile can be withdrawn. So important, right? Inconsistent responses are still incredibly meaningful.

And our regulation and the way we communicate, matters. So our tone, timing, and proximity to the learners that we support will often shape outcomes.

Oh, Lee, I love this. For those who are not able to see it, Lee shared that they have a lot of ideas, and talk about this frequently. Lee, I'd love to pick your brain again.

One idea they use is to create a song for the little ones called... I don't... I'm gonna sing it wrong, so I won't try, but brush, brush, brush, which gets the kids dancing and having fun. Brushing does not need to be done in the bathroom. My patients can brush where they want. Just brush. Love, love, love that.

So great! Like, again, just creating a really fun environment, right? Just can do so much in supporting folks and make something that's not so fun more fun for... for many.

And I do, I love things like turning things into song can make me do things that I don't necessarily want to do, so I love that.



Okay, so I want to take a few minutes to, share about some learners, dive into case discussions. I'm going to keep an eye on the time. I know we've got a bunch of things that we want to get through, but I'm always, always happy to continue chatting, because I find this, again, to be so valuable. Thank you, everybody.

Okay, so let's start with our amazing learner number one, Maya.

Maya is a 9-year-old autistic student who communicates using spoken language. She attends a general education classroom with support services and particularly enjoys science, art, and collaborative projects.

Maya frequently expresses preferences and is comfortable requesting assistance or asking questions.

Maya's class is beginning a small group science experiment involving building and testing simple bridges. Before the activity begins, Maya, walked directly to the table, Asked, "are we doing bridges today?", Requests to sit with a particular group, Reviews the instruction sheet before the teacher begins.

During the activity, Maya actively participates in the planning, the construction, asks questions, requests more materials, continues to work, after others have finished. When the teacher announces the activity's ending, Maya asks, "can I have a few more minutes?"

So, things to consider: what behaviors there suggest a sense, what gives us confidence in our interpretation, and could there be alternative explanations?

So, feel free to think about that a little bit, and in the interest of time, I'm just gonna move us ahead. Lee, absolutely. Thank you.

And I'm just saying this out loud to remind myself, that I want to really go back to the question that was posted in the chat.

Amazing. Continuous participation and involvement in tasks. Absolutely. I think you nailed it. Those are definitely indicators of assent.

What I put here, the emphasis was added, possible indicators of assent, examples may include, because we know it can change contextually, approaching people exactly, as our colleague put in the chat. Forgive me, you don't want to say your name incorrectly, continuing, re-engaging, expressing interest, enthusiasm? Absolutely.

So the key message here, and I'm sorry I'm going through this quickly, I apologize, I want to make sure we get to everything.

Key message here is assent may be communicated in many ways, and should be interpreted within the individual's unique communication repertoire.

So now let's move... so we have four case studies altogether, and one of the case studies, the last one we're going to continue to revisit, in the last part of our conversation today.



Jordan is a 12-year-old autistic learner who communicates using a combination of speech and AAC. Jordan attends a specialized educational program and has worked with the same team for several years. Staff frequently describe Jordan as “easygoing” and “compliant.”

I'm gonna say out loud that I really dislike the term compliance and compliance, as you might have seen, so I just felt compelled to say it out loud.

During a daily instructional session, Jordan completes all assigned tasks, responds accurately to most instructional requests or demands, transitions between activities, does not usually request breaks, rarely comments on activities, and rarely expresses preferences regarding materials or tasks.

Staff report that Jordan almost never refuses activities, completes work with minimal prompting, and typically appears calm throughout sessions.

During a recent team meeting, a staff member said, “Jordan always assents because he never says no.”

Another team member asks, “But how do we know whether Jordan enjoys these activities or wants to participate?”

So, questions to reflect on. What information might be missing?

Is participation sufficient evidence of assent?

How might we gather information about Jordan's preferences, and what assumptions could the team be making?

So give... just giving us all, like, a second to consider and to think about that.

And something to consider here... yes, Garetti, missing is evidence of assent behavior. Yusuf says, I think another important thing the student should not change, teacher often.

Yeah, I appreciate that, Yusuf, as well. We're actually going to talk about that a little bit, too, but... again, contextual, right? If you're working with someone that you don't have rapport with, it can be that you don't... enjoy yet. That can be a lot harder. I know it is for me. I thank you both for those really excellent observations.

And as our colleagues are talking about here, participation doesn't necessarily equal assent.

Participation, you know, in that scenario, which, again, we have very limited information, but we're not necessarily sure if the learner is enjoying the activity, if the learner would choose the activity, if they feel comfortable expressing preferences, and so on.

So again, key message here is that participation or compliance may provide some information, but it does not, you can tell how I feel about this, does not necessarily indicate willingness, agreement, or assent.



Karen, we also, yes, agreed. There's definitely more information that would be beneficial there. We don't know what it looks like when Jordan refuses an activity.

Olivia, all the activities she does participate in could be put in a preference assessment. Fabulous idea. Love, love, love that. Embedding those choices, embedding autonomy, so great.

Laura, unfortunately, sometimes I think it's difficult to know when a learner doesn't have the verbal language to express their preferences. Laura, I agree with you completely, and that was beautifully articulated.

And so, I think what I kind of think about as I read your very powerful point, is that then, as a teacher, it would be important for me to think about ways that I can support Jordan to communicate, because that's definitely a responsibility that I have, and how we can create an environment in which Jordan can communicate in ways that are best for them. So I love, I love that point.

Learner 3, Luis.

Luis is a 7-year-old autistic learner who has participated in ABA, OT speech, and PT services for approximately 18 months.

Luis uses spoken language and enjoys building activities, movement games, interacting with familiar staff members.

Yusuf, I think you were talking about this before. Historically, staff described Luis as highly engaged during sessions.

Over the past several weeks, Luis' team has observed changes in participation. Previously, Luis was observed to enter sessions enthusiastically, happily, we were talking about those indices of happiness, request preferred activities, initiate, you know, interacting with staff.

Recently, staff have observed that Luis is requesting breaks more frequently, requires more prompting to start activities, initiates less often, and appears less engaged.

Importantly, there are no major changes in "challenging" behavior that has occurred. Luis is continuing to complete most activities, and attendance continues to remain consistent.

Yeah, Jessica, that's a really good point. Jessica writes in the chat, I'd also consider if the child participates in a behavior to receive a desired outcome, praise, attention, avoid rejection, rather than become because he enjoys it. And I just think that that's so important.

I... forgive me for being repetitive or redundant, but those choices on what to do, so powerful, so important. And I know that we can't always offer that, right? Like, again, some things, like we were talking about assent, you know, in contextual, there are some things that we do have to do in school, let's say, but there are a lot of things, a lot, a lot of areas where we can embed choices.

One... one area I think of is, that we... I had to, as a teacher, this was hard for me, when we would have a fire drill.



I... and I was in a school, I won't say the school, but we were outside for a very, very, very long time, and that was incredibly difficult for my learners, but that was a situation where I think it was incredibly important for me to, you know, practice that drill with our learners.

So, I was not able, unfortunately, to honor the extensive requests to go back inside that were communicated in different ways. But in so many other places, we can embed, choices.

I mean, yeah, so questions. What might Luis be communicating? Is there anything medical going on? Any sleep changes?

Yes, Jacqueline says we should also consider any sending events. For example, is there anything happening behind the scenes that's impacting his participation?

Yes, yes, yes. You know, it's kind of, like, I have to say, I'm so overjoyed, again, to, like, read all of these, comments, because it just... makes me so happy that all of us are... all of you are in the field supporting these learners, because while we talk about that, I hope, I think it's so important for me to put that in my mind as part of assent, right?

Again, creating universally proactive supports can support assent. So considering setting events, there might be something going on at home, that can be challenging. There might be a medical issue, other things that we're not aware of.

So, again, all different things that Louise might be communicating, other information, contextual variables.

All right, now I want to introduce us to... Whoops! So yes, we talked about this, so the key message, looking for patterns rather than isolated behavior is super important.

So now I want to introduce us to Amina, which is, the incredible learner that we will come back to over the next 15 minutes.

Amina is a 14-year-old autistic learner with extensive support needs. Amina enjoys music, sensory activities, and spending time with familiar staff and family members.

Team members report that she demonstrates clear preferences, but that those preferences are not always expressed through conventional forms of communication.

She communicates through a combination of facial expressions, body positioning, gestures, vocalizations, and limited AAC selections.

So, during a preferred music activity, Amina might walk towards the area, smile when they see materials, reach towards instruments, select more on her AAC device.

During a different instructional activity later in the day, staff observed that Amina is turning their body away from materials, placing items on the table rather than interacting with them, is moving toward the classroom door, and producing fewer vocalizations than usual.



One staff member interprets these behaviors as refusal. Another suggests that Amina may be communicating discomfort or withdrawal of assent.

Later, the team learns that Amina attended a loud school assembly earlier that day, her AAC device battery had been low, and her parent reports that she slept poorly the previous night. Jacqueline, thinking very much about your comment regarding setting events.

So, just questions for us to consider.

What might assent look like for Amina? What might assent withdrawal look like?

How does context influence interpretation? What additional perspectives would be helpful, and how should the team respond?

Yes, Yusuf, I agree with you wholeheartedly, giving children opportunities when we think about prompts, and I'm actually going to hopefully talk about that in the next few minutes.

So, let's discuss that together.

I'd love for all of us to, again, take a moment, kind of reflect, feel free to pop into the chat.

I am, again, colleagues, I know, you know, we've got about 15 minutes, I want to be mindful of that. But would love your thoughts about examples there that might indicate assent.

And as you get... getting a pattern, I very clearly... we want to emphasize, might indicate assent, may indicate assent, because we... it can change, and examples that may indicate assent withdrawal for Amina.

And I sincerely apologize that we don't have a ton of time, but... as we're reflecting through that. here are some examples that may indicate assent. The approaching, the reaching, yes, Olivia, requesting, moving towards staff. Turning away, assent withdrawal, yes, agree with that wholeheartedly. I think in that situation, absolutely.

And that's perfect, I'm gonna share this now. Examples that may indicate that assent withdrawal, turning the body away, as was mentioned in the chat, beautiful, placing the materials down, moving away from activity, becoming quieter, so on and so forth.

So, all of behaviors that may indicate assent, that may indicate assent withdrawal.

Something I wanted to emphasize here, too, is, you know, again, like, the joy of working on an interdisciplinary team is just... it's so profound, because each team member can observe different strengths, communication patterns. contexts, right? Environmental influences and priorities that will help us have a better understanding of our learner.

And without having that understanding of our learner, without understanding Amina, we would have, I think, less of an understanding of the behaviors that would... may indicate assent, or may not, or may indicate assent withdrawal.



And so that key message, you know, that we keep going back to is that context is really essential.

I love... thank you for sharing that. Really, that individualized protocol for this learner, when they are interested and happy, they smile, they hand me materials, and when not, they turn away.

Agree, Olivia, we need to make sure to look at staff behavior and how that interacts, right? Because the way our behavior... our behavior can set the tone, right? It's actually... part of that universal environment.

And I know that it's not always easy, the work that we do, and so that's something to really think about, right? Burnout, care for ourselves, definitely worthwhile to come back to that conversation. But our responses are so important as we think about, working with our learners.

Karen... That's really helpful. Karen shares, in case we have time to discuss, child who requested help with a toy that was malfunctioning, but when I went to help them, said my turn and became upset.

Yeah, I'd love to, love, love, love to pin that. And colleagues, if we can't get to all of the questions, because, for today, I'll share my email with you and love to keep chatting.

Okay, so again, that... that key is that context matters.

No one behavior or set of behaviors will automatically indicate assent or assent withdrawal, right? It was that understanding of our learner that can... that is incredibly helpful.

And that one behavior, one topography, the way one behavior looks like, can have different meanings across learners and, situations.

And our goal, I believe, is not to... and what we believe is not to create, like, a universal checklist of what indicates assent and what indicates assent withdrawal, but instead to develop individualized understandings of communication patterns. And always asking ourselves, what might the learner be trying to communicate?

So just saying that again is that that same behavior can have different meanings depending on context, and context certainly influences meaningful participation.

So let's revisit Amina, briefly, as we were thinking about that, right, the... how one behavior may indicate different things.

So, one behavior that we talked about is that turning away from materials, but the context is that can absolutely be different, can change, right? There's a loud assembly, poor sleep.

In another environment, Amina may be working on a difficult task. In another one, there might be a musical instrument nearby that she really wants to play with.



So knowing our learners, just re-emphasizing, becomes so important, because our interpretation, and therefore our responding, our support, is really dependent on that context, so that we can respond in the best way possible, bearing all of these things in mind.

And so I just wanted to bring, this graphic back up again, because I wanted to just highlight that middle piece, right? Like, again, of assent being that meaningful interpretation of participation, right?

So, not assuming that turning away means X, but instead, what's the context, and what are the... how does learner communicate? What are all the contingencies that are affecting, and how might we interpret?

Okay, so hopefully going to start rounding us out with a few universal and proactive interdisciplinary approaches to build those assent supportive practices.

And the first one are a few more guiding principles. And we've talked about this a lot in the chat here, which I'm so grateful for, but that all behavior is communication.

Autonomy includes the ability to say yes, no, or not right now. That we are emphasizing assent, not compliance. Feel so strongly about that. Compliance should not be used, assent should be used. Self-determination, that learners really benefit when we support strength-based choices.

Context matters, and it's important for us to have those strategic questions, like we just did, where we're thinking about, you know, one behavior, but different contexts and different interpretations.

And trust. I love, love, love that we've been talking about this in the chat as well. How we respond influences our learners and influences future communication and participation.

So really thinking about assent as a collaborative process, amongst our teams and our learners, if applicable, their caregivers.

So I think something that some of us, you know, have a background and are aware, but self-advocacy and meaningful strength-based choices are so powerful, creating those frequent opportunities for learners to influence their environment, and expanding opportunities for choice.

So again, I keep coming back to that first question. I think it is... so I want to just also explicitly answer that. Thank you for your patience.

I think it's absolutely appropriate to consider assent and what is developmentally appropriate. You know, like things, like Lee was sharing with us, different strategies that they've used with toothbrushing and so on.

To the best of our ability, expanding those opportunities of choice, making the environment super fun, wonderful, you know, kind of being flexible on our end can help support learners, who might not want to do things like brush their teeth to do that.



Again, knowing that's not a perfect solution by any means, right? There's so many more things to consider, there's so many more contexts to consider, but one possibility to just sort of, reflect on it for all of us, I think.

So yes, we definitely want to balance, you know, meaningful participation, what are some things that we absolutely have to do? And if... so if we know that we have to, like, brush our teeth, how can we make that an even more repetitive environment?

So, teaching those self-advocacy skills, right, requesting help, requesting a break, Lee, thinking about, like, you know, we might start with the toothbrush to the teeth, and forgive me, just going back to this example, it's one that's on my mind. And then we work on, you know, now it's brushing a little bit more, then a little bit more.

So, you know, how to modify to make things, you know, increasingly supportive, but still reaching our goal, and supporting agency.

Can I help? We talked about prompting in the chat. What would you like me to show you? I'm going to help you with.

And then I, you know, just ask us to ask ourselves, is refusal the learner's only option?

Can the learner influence what happens next, right? Are we allowing for the learner to influence what happens next to the best of our ability? And have we taught alternatives to disengagement?

So, a slide my colleague, Dr. Leshma Allen and I love to share, is this... is adapted from an article by Brown and colleagues in 1993.

And that's just something for us to think about, also, as we think about choices. In the scenario in the article, a person was informed that it's time for a snack, and they could have a choice of 3 cookies versus a piece of cake.

Something to consider, though, is that they wanted ice cream, their within activities choice was denied. If they wanted a nap instead, the between activities choice was denied. If they didn't want a snack, their choice to refuse was denied.

So, again, we can only make the best decisions possible, knowing our learner, knowing the context, but really building and working for that autonomy, self-determination, dignity, quality of life.

Forgive me for going too fast. So, these are just some ideas of kind of an old instinct, like we talk with our students about.

Instead of they're not listening, what communication am I missing? Instead of they won't choose, are they regulated enough to choose?

Instead of getting compliance, are we working to understand communication? Instead of prompting faster, are we slowing down, observing? Instead of fixing behavior, are we supporting regulation? And instead of controlling outcome, do we expand options?



So ideally, we're designing environments where learners can communicate in multiple ways, access meaningful choices, request support, influence participation, understand expectations, and engage with reduced barriers.

And this is... this slide just shows some of those ways, like a traditional approach, for example, could be, okay, after the worksheet, you get a break, and instead, breaking when... breaking being available when requested.

Instead of only vocal spoken directions, written directions, directions on the AEC device, multiple ways to communicate.

With the key message here, really just being that assent supportive environments don't eliminate our expectations.

They instead reduce unnecessary barriers while expanding opportunities for our learners to communicate, have choices, strength-based choices, and meaningfully participate.

So, I think what I am going to leave us here with quickly, and always, always happy to talk more, is that all of the things that we have been talking about or doing, is what we like to share with our students at Empire State as strategic questioning.

So, really thinking meaningfully about the situation and doing that every time, so that we can take a moment to reflect and recognize if we are having biases or making assumptions, recognizing communication beyond spoken language, considering context, and so on, and doing that so frequently that it becomes automatic, becomes part of our repertoires.

Because we can't always know exactly what a learner is communicating, but we can ask better questions before we make decisions.

And these are exemplars, and again, I'll share out the slides if anybody would like them. These are exemplars of different interdisciplinary strategic questions that we might be able to ask for a sense-supported practice.

So, what might they be communicating? What variables are affecting their participation? What supports are available? What do family and team members notice? And what are the immediate effects of our response?

So revisiting Amina.

Again, we talked about some of the areas that we observed, and here are examples of strategic questions we could ask ourselves. So, when Amina turns away, what might Amina be communicating?

And so, based on our observations, the context, the strategic questions, and our possible responses, all coupled together, is that we have one possible individualized assent protocol for Amina.

And then always, always assessing those outcomes. Were learner communication and preferences recognized? Barriers to participation reduced? Decisions reflecting context? Did we strengthen trust and relationships, and did we promote autonomy?



Because there may not be a perfect or exactly right solution.

But if we have to start anywhere, where I... what I always start with, I try, is what might the learner be feeling? What might they be experiencing? What's the best decision I can make, considering all of those guiding principles that we discussed?

And then one thing I really... we try to emphasize is following up on that, right? And doing it in a way that reinforces the decision-making. Not every decision we make is going to be right.

But the most important thing, I think, is that we're learning from those decisions to support our learners.

So just, again, thinking about taking those old instincts and moving towards an assent-based shift.

And what's really cool, and what this slide talks about, is that that is an emerging direction in literature and research, in a sense, supportive practice.

So really, that community-informed piece, individualized assent protocols, and universal and systems-level supports, and hopefully one day you can come back and report out, because we are working on that, with OAR... with OAR's support to create community-informed, individualized assent-based approaches.

So, community-informed toolkit to teach assent, and honoring assent withdrawal, and then subsequently individualizing it for each learner, and looking to see if indices of happiness increase.

And I know other amazing colleagues have done some work like that, too.

So, key takeaways, I know we're at time, thank you, thank you, thank you. Assent is individualized and ongoing. Participation does not necessarily indicate willingness. Context is important. Building environments that support communication, choice, and self-advocacy are so helpful, and as is teaching strategic thinking, not just procedures.

So, I'll ask us to just, starting tomorrow, what's one small thing that we could do that would support assent-supportive practices? For example, maybe asking a few strategic questions.

Kim, sorry, we don't have time for reflections or discussion, specifically here, but... thank you, thank you, everybody, wholeheartedly for your time. Thanks, or for having me, and I appreciate you all for coming on this journey with me today.

Happy Thursday!

**Kimberly Ha**

01:00:44



Thank you so much, Noor, for an amazing, engaging, and interactive session, for breaking down all the key aspects of assent, dissent, and compliance, and showing us how we can hopefully support greater autonomy among autistic learners in our everyday practice.

I'd also like to thank our partners, Endicott College and Eden 2 programs, for partnering with OAR to make this amazing webinar series possible. It's been our absolute pleasure collaborating with you on this.

And to everyone who had some last-minute questions and comments coming in, we'll share those with you, Noor, so that you can then respond if you'd like, via email afterwards.

And then, last but not least, thank you everyone for contributing to such a rich discussion today, and for everything that you do every day.

On behalf of OAR and its amazing partners, thank you again for joining us. We hope you have a great rest of your day. Thank you again so much, Noor.

**Noor Syed**

01:01:33

Thank you, everybody. Take care.