

# THE DIGITAL ACCESS SHOW EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

## Episode Title: Keyword Sign with Libby Brownlie

Series: Season 3, Episode 10

### Introduction

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#### **Narelle:**

Hi, welcome to this week's episode of The Digital Access Show. I'm telling you straight up, I know nothing about what we're going to talk about. I know of it, but I don't understand anything about it. So I've brought along someone who does. Libby Brownlie, thank you.

#### **Libby:**

That's my pleasure, and thanks for the invitation. It's great to have an opportunity to talk about this.

### About Libby Brownlie

#### **Narelle:**

Libby, can you tell me a little bit about yourself and what got you into this field?

#### **Libby:**

Oh gosh, okay. Well, I'm a speech therapist by training. I don't work much now I'm technically retired but I've worked across all age ranges. Early in my career, I worked with children with delays or disabilities in early intervention programs, mostly in northern New South Wales.

Later, I moved back to Melbourne and worked with children in schools and also with adults with intellectual disabilities in various settings.

Most of my work has focused on people with communication difficulties especially those who need alternative ways to communicate because speech isn't sufficient.

Speech is incredibly complex. When you think about it, the coordination required breathing, mouth movements, cognitive processing, it's remarkable. Language itself is abstract and learning it takes years.

### **Understanding Communication Challenges**

#### **Narelle:**

You've opened a Pandora's box in my mind. I've got so many questions now.

#### **Libby:**

That complexity explains why communication often breaks down for people with disabilities, especially cognitive or intellectual impairments.

### **What is Keyword Sign?**

#### **Narelle:**

I've heard of augmentative tools, but what you're describing keyword sign, what is it exactly?

#### **Libby:**

Keyword sign is a communication strategy used for people who have difficulty understanding or producing speech. It involves using manual signs borrowed from Auslan (Australian Sign Language) alongside spoken words.

It's important to note keyword sign is not Auslan. Auslan is a full language used by the Deaf community. Keyword sign simply borrows signs and pairs them with spoken English.

You only sign the key words in a sentence. For example:

“I'm going to go shopping and buy some milk.”

You'd only sign go, shopping, and milk.

This makes communication clearer and easier to understand.

### **Who Uses Keyword Sign?**

**Narelle:**

So this could apply to people with strokes or brain injuries too?

**Libby:**

Absolutely. It's for anyone any age who has difficulty with speech, whether producing or understanding it.

### **How Libby Got Into Keyword Sign**

**Narelle:**

How did you get into it?

**Libby:**

Through my work. I saw how effective it was. I did some training and loved it. It made communication easier, especially with children who would otherwise become frustrated.

When they could use signs even with unclear speech, I could understand them. That success made a huge difference.

## **History of Keyword Sign**

**Narelle:**

How long has keyword sign been around?

**Libby:**

In Australia, since around the mid-1980s. It was originally called *Makaton*, which is still used in the UK. Makaton uses British Sign Language, while keyword sign in Australia uses Auslan.

## **The Role of Gesture in Communication**

**Narelle:**

Sign has always existed in different forms, hasn't it?

**Libby:**

Yes, exactly. We all use gestures naturally especially in noisy environments or over distance. Even babies use gestures before they can speak.

Keyword sign combines formal signs with natural gestures, creating a rich communication system.

## **Teaching Keyword Sign**

**Narelle:**

How do you teach someone keyword sign?

**Libby:**

It depends on the person. For children, the best approach is immersion using signs around them regularly.

For communication partners (family, carers, teachers), training is essential. Workshops are the most effective way to start.

You can learn online, but you must ensure you're using Auslan-based resources not American or British sign systems.

### **How Many Signs Are There?**

**Narelle:**

Is there a limited number of signs?

**Libby:**

Not really, but you don't need to learn thousands. A basic workshop might teach 80 signs. Also, one sign can represent multiple similar words like "cookie," "biscuit," and "cracker."

### **Why Isn't Keyword Sign More Widely Known?**

**Narelle:**

Why isn't it more well known?

**Libby:**

Because it's mostly used within the disability sector. Unlike Auslan, it hasn't been widely mainstreamed.

It's part of what we call *augmentative and alternative communication* (AAC), which includes tools that either support or replace speech.

### **Keyword Sign vs High-Tech Communication Tools**

**Libby:**

Many people now use high-tech AAC devices. These are more visible and widely promoted.

But keyword sign has advantages:

- It's always available

- No batteries required
- It's direct and personal
- It encourages eye contact and connection

### **Will Keyword Sign Disappear?**

**Narelle:**

Do you think keyword sign might fade away?

**Libby:**

I hope not. Many people who use high-tech tools still prefer signing when they can. It's more immediate and personal.

### **The Importance of Non-Verbal Communication**

**Libby:**

Keyword sign also incorporates facial expressions, body language, and gesture all of which enhance communication.

### **What Can the Community Do?**

**Narelle:**

What can listeners do?

**Libby:**

Be aware of it. Learn a few signs if you're interested. Explore trusted Auslan resources. And consider learning more if someone in your life could benefit.

### **Closing Remarks**

**Narelle:**

Libby, thank you so much. This has been fascinating and eye-opening.

To our listeners please like, subscribe, share, and review. Your feedback matters.

We'll see you next week with another interesting guest.

Thank you and goodbye.

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