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Cover: Tom uses a Go Talk 20 and BIGmack
in his mainstream primary school
(photo courtesy of CENMAC, London)

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Teaming Up to Take Switch Use from Cause and Effect to Communication Or Beyond the BIGMack!

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Don't you just love BIGMacks? They (and perhaps I should mention there are other wonderful single message communicators!) are great devices for helping children build an understanding of the link between making a noise, saying a word, or reaching for a picture and the effect this has on the people near them. At a very young age, most babies make the connection that when they smile and giggle, other people tend to interact with them in an enjoyable way and as a result, they smile and giggle more often. Similarly, a child making a raspberry sound by pressing a BigMack may learn that this makes others around them laugh or react in a comical way and this makes them want to press it again.

This is a crucial stage of learning and for some children this level of 'cause and effect communication' may take some time to learn. For others it is achieved quite quickly and they are ready to move on to develop further communication skills. We are getting better at using these devices now for a variety of communication functions. Not only are they used for gaining attention and provoking a reaction (thanks to the more imaginative and daring amongst you for farts, burps, wolf-whistles etc!) but also we use them to greet people, direct others (e.g. more, stop, help), name things (e.g. through the use of talking labels) and turn take (e.g. saying lines in

a story or role play). We are also starting to give children more opportunities to use these devices throughout the day and are getting the idea that messages need to be changed frequently to maintain motivation and increase communication opportunities. Using single message communicators in such a way allows children to move on from simple cause and effect to experiencing a range of different communication functions.

Nevertheless, sticking with single message devices severely limits the range of vocabulary to which a child has access at any one time. What the child can say is entirely dependent on what the adult has programmed into the aid, with limited opportunity to practise and use the different vocabulary they might have experienced. Once children have demonstrated an ability to express themselves with a variety of different single messages covering a range of functions, the next step is to give them access to more than one message at a time. In this way, they can begin to learn how to discriminate and use words with different communication consequences. However, as teachers, support workers, parents and therapists, we don't seem to be as

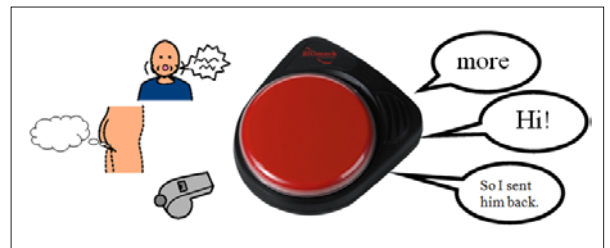


Figure 1 BIGMack with reaction-provoking cause and effect noises and extended communication functions

confident in knowing exactly how to move people on to this level of communication. Devices with more than one message pose two difficult questions; which words do you choose to put on them and how does the child access them if they find it difficult to press something smaller than a BigMack?

The most logical step, you would think, when progressing from a single message device is to provide devices that can say two messages. Often children do move from using one BIGMack to using two BIGMacks. However logical this may seem, this can present a physical challenge for some children; they may only be just able to physically reach and activate one BigMack comfortably. Introducing another target area to hit may mean that the child spends more time and effort trying to hit the right BIGMack, without accidentally hitting the other one than they do in learn-

ing about communication. Activating two BigMacks or two switches may be a skill worth learning; yet if this is physically difficult for the child it could take time to learn this skill and for some children it may never be a feasible option. Whatever the case, physical access, as far as is possible, shouldn't delay or detract from providing an appropriate means of communication. (This is usually the point when we would consider low-tech communication and access methods other than switching, but perhaps these subjects require another article!)

If a child is only able to hit a large target area, like the BIGMack, the simple communication aids available to them that provide two or more messages are going to involve an element of scanning. This can be auditory (the choice of messages are spoken sequentially) or visual (a moving light indicates which picture or symbol representing a message is 'active') or both. The child will be required to either follow the scan then hit a switch at the right time to activate the message they want or the child has to move the scan along by repeatedly hitting a switch until they get to the desired message. Not only is this a huge physical leap for most children to make that may take hours, months or even years to learn, it also involves a great deal of cognitive processing that tends to again distract from the main purpose; communication.

The other big question is; what words do you put on two-message devices? We tend to automatically think of providing choices, e.g. milk/juice, dolls/cars, red/yellow.

Although making choices is an important part of communication and learning, there are many other aspects of language development that should also be considered. Indeed, in normal language development, you might find that children between the ages of one (typically using 'cause and effect communication' and some first words) and two years (early sentence builders with a vocabulary of 100s of words) will not always respond appropriately to choice questions.

Often it depends on many factors including their listening and attention to the question and the importance to that child of the choices on offer (I find that many children between these ages do often respond well to "Do you want chocolate or crisps?" but not as well with "Do you want milk or water?"). If two-message devices are going to be used, it may be more appropriate to use high frequency, reusable vocabulary on them that give real communicative power across a broad range of activities (core vocabulary). For example, stop/go, on/off, me/you, want/no, help/all done, here/away, and more/

finished. For more information on core vocabulary to choose, have a look at Inclusive Technology's Communication Handbook www.inclusive.co.uk.

When considering moving children on from single message communicators it is worthwhile thinking about the type of language that speaking children typically use between one and two years of age. Often they take great delight in playing with language; labelling what's around in their immediate environment; making comments such as 'dirty' and 'hot' and requesting or directing others with words such as 'more', 'up' and 'look'. And don't forget the very important word "No"! As many of you will know this is used very frequently by toddlers and provides the important functions of rejection, cessation and non-existence (core vocabulary). Toddlers also spend a lot of their time talking about their special interests that can be unique to the child. This could be trains, light switches, washing machines or even toilets! By two, they may have built a vocabulary of hundreds of words and be starting to combine these into phrases and simple sentences.

However, it is not only the amount and type of words that children with normal language development have that differs from what we provide for children who use AAC methods. It is also how we respond and expect our children to use these words. In educational establishments especially, we are pretty obsessed with 'assessing' and getting responses from AAC users. If a child does have access to more than one picture or message we typically ask questions such as "Can you find the ...?", "Which one ...?", "What do you ...?". In contrast, in normal language development the child is usually the initiator. They point or vocalise about something, we respond, repeat back what they have said and expand on this. For example: "ca" (child points to a cat that's just caught their attention); adult looks to where child is pointing and says, "cat"/"yes, that's Sooty the cat, meow".

This is a tried and tested method of teaching language that many of us use naturally. With toddlers, we rarely bombard them with questions or even expect them to respond appropriately to what we say. In education and therapy we do seem to have forgotten about this stage of 'teaching' language and are a little uncomfortable about letting the child take the lead, then listening and responding to what they have said. Partly this is because we rarely give children at this level the means to initiate in the same way. Very few children, despite using single message devices appropriately, are then given access to a range of vocabulary items with opportunities to initiate and 'play' with these words.

Having said all this, in the busy classroom catering for lots of children with various needs, I fully understand that this may be a difficult challenge to meet. Invariably, the toddler will have access to far more individual attention by people who know the child well and can respond immediately and appropriately to whatever the child says.

We need to be practical - utilize the activities we are already doing in the classroom and re-use the resources we already have. There will be an element of extra work in printing out communication aid overlays and recording appropriate vocabulary, but the main change perhaps will be in how you expect the child to communicate and how you respond to their attempts. Our goal is to allow children to be the initiators and play with a range of vocabulary that is relevant to them and gain experience of using switches and scanning in a very non-threatening way.

ENVIRONMENT VOCABULARY

As toddlers spend a lot of time talking about what is in their immediate environment, it may be beneficial to provide similar opportunities for the child who is just learning to use a communication aid. Virtually all classrooms now have access to a digital camera and many make use



Figure 2 Digital photo of child's classroom made into a talking picture on the L*E*O

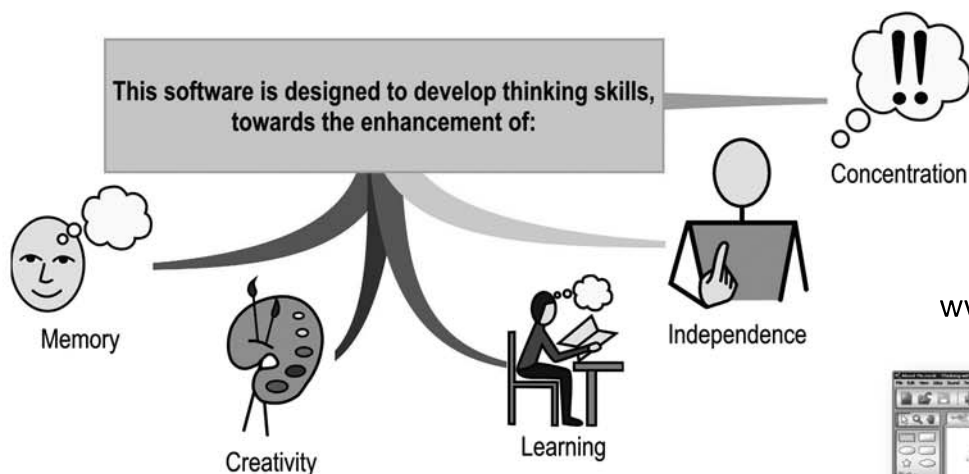
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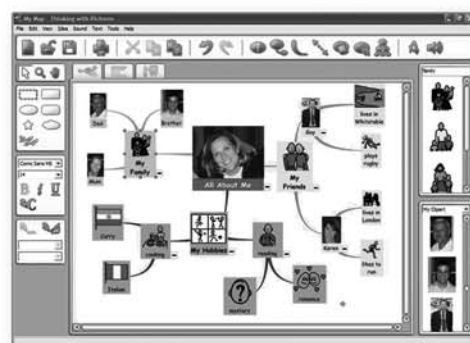
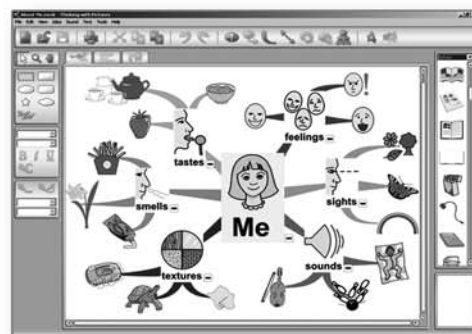
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of them on a daily basis. Research seems to suggest that composite pictures/ photographs or 'visual scenes' can be more meaningful to children at the early stages of communication than the more traditional grid arrangement of vocabulary.

Start by taking digital photos of the places the child spends a lot of time in e.g. the classroom and make these into 'talking pictures'. Communication aids such as the Boardmaker Activity Pad, Smart/128 and the L*E*O have the capacity to assign 'hotspots' to pictures to then record in words or messages that relate to that part of the picture. The L*E*O is also capable of scanning these hotspots for children who need to use a switch. Keep this communication aid out in the classroom (or whichever location you choose to photograph) and allow time in the day for the child to explore. Involve other members of the class in expanding on what is selected, e.g. what sound does it begin with? What material is it made out of? What do you do there? How many are there? - relating to the teaching of the day. You can use the same principle with people; a talking photo of all the members of the class can be very motivational.

Another way to extend language skills in the classroom is to utilise computer software and interactive whiteboards/plasma screens which are being increasingly used throughout the teaching day. This is particularly relevant if the software you are using links to everyday routines or common classroom/curriculum vocabulary.

Linking communication activities with the computer has several advantages. Most children find the computer very motivating and as such are more likely to want to communicate about it; teachers and parents are already familiar with the software the children enjoy using; you can use the digital resources provided by software and use these on communication aids; if the software you are using has switch access it can be used to practice switch scanning skills.

SPECIFIC INTERESTS

If you find a child responds well to cause and effect software that contains very specific topics, for example the Priory Woods resources (farting dinosaurs, dancing alien, banana phone - if you have no idea what I am talking about then please visit <http://www.priorywoods.middlesbrough.sch.uk>), or SwitchIt Maker/Powerpoint activities you have made yourself, then use those images on a communication aid with a short clip of the relevant music or the name of the activity.

Communication aids such as the Scan 4 and Fl4sh are great for switch users at this early level of accessing multiple mes-

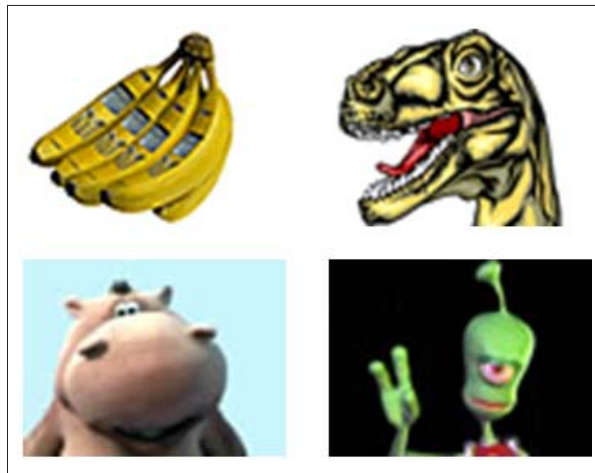


Figure 3 Pictures taken from Cause and Effect/Targeting Activities download page at Priory Woods site

sages. For children using direct access you could also consider the Go Talk 4+, 4 x Partner/Plus, 4talk4 or the Partner 4.

For children who have had no experience of scanning, there will be a need to play and explore the access method as well as the vocabulary. You may want to experiment initially with:

- Single switch automatic scanning (the communication aid automatically scans and you hit a switch when it gets to the message you want);
- Step scanning (whereby the child moves the scan along with each press of a switch and then pauses to make the selection);
- Two switch scanning (one switch moves the scan along and the second switch makes the selection). Two switch scanning can be simplified for the child initially if they use the switch

to move the scan and the adult interprets the child's intention and presses the 'select' switch for them. You can also use software like SwitchIt Maker 2 to introduce simple, errorless choice making and practice two switch scanning if you choose this option. This enables the child to use one switch to scroll through the pictures and a second switch to play the sound or message that goes with that picture.

Resist the temptation to use these messages for choosing, try and let the

child explore for themselves the messages on the communication aid. There should be no right or wrong answers, you are just facilitating the child to learn that different 'messages' have different consequences. Don't worry that you are not providing 'communication' messages at first, it's about getting the child's attention and motivation and building their understanding of the communication process. On this note, remember too it is how you respond when the child does select a message that is important. So if you are going to put Priory Wood switch activity pictures on the communication aid you will have to be prepared to either play that activity on the computer or sing/act out that particular activity. Having a person react to a message replicates communication in a much more natural way so be daring and practice your disco moves to "I will survive" - and you will be rewarded with a great reaction from the child!

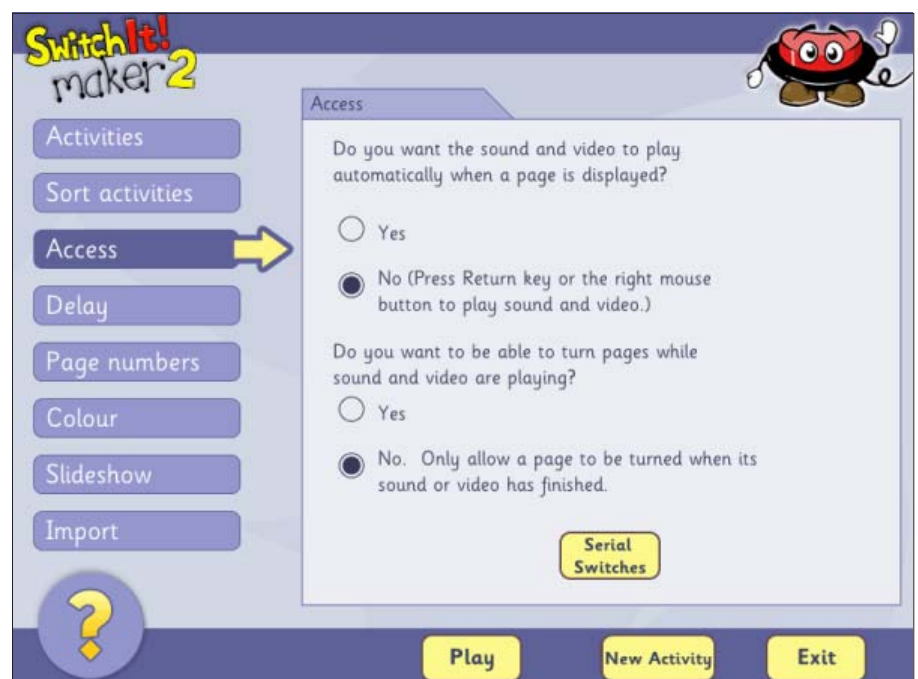


Figure 4 Screen shot from SwitchIt! Maker 2 access options to make simple choice 2 switch activity

INCREASING VOCABULARY AND EXTENDING LANGUAGE

Software that focuses on topic areas such as the SwitchIt! Series (e.g. Farm, People, Transport) can be used to good effect in introducing categories of vocabulary (and possibly linked to areas of the curriculum). The Extra series also come with some lovely printable resources that can be used to make communication overlays. Aids that have 'smart' overlay systems (i.e. put in an overlay and the device reads the bar code or chip and automatically changes the messages accordingly) allowing quick changes of vocabulary are perfect for giving access to lots and lots of different words to play with. The Fl4sh, L*E*O and the Smart/Scan have this feature and are switch accessible.

In addition to providing the basic vocabulary items, try and be creative in how you present this vocabulary e.g. for farm activities, include animal noises or songs. You can also encourage initiation by giving the communication aid user the ability to ask the questions. The benefit of this is that whatever the child selects is correct, they gain the experience of using questions and you can involve other children in providing the answers.

You can download free communication aid overlays that go with SwitchIt! Farm Extra from www.inclusive.co.uk.

Utilize the picture menu option in picture builds and stories for a simple, errorless introduction to choosing (as long as you

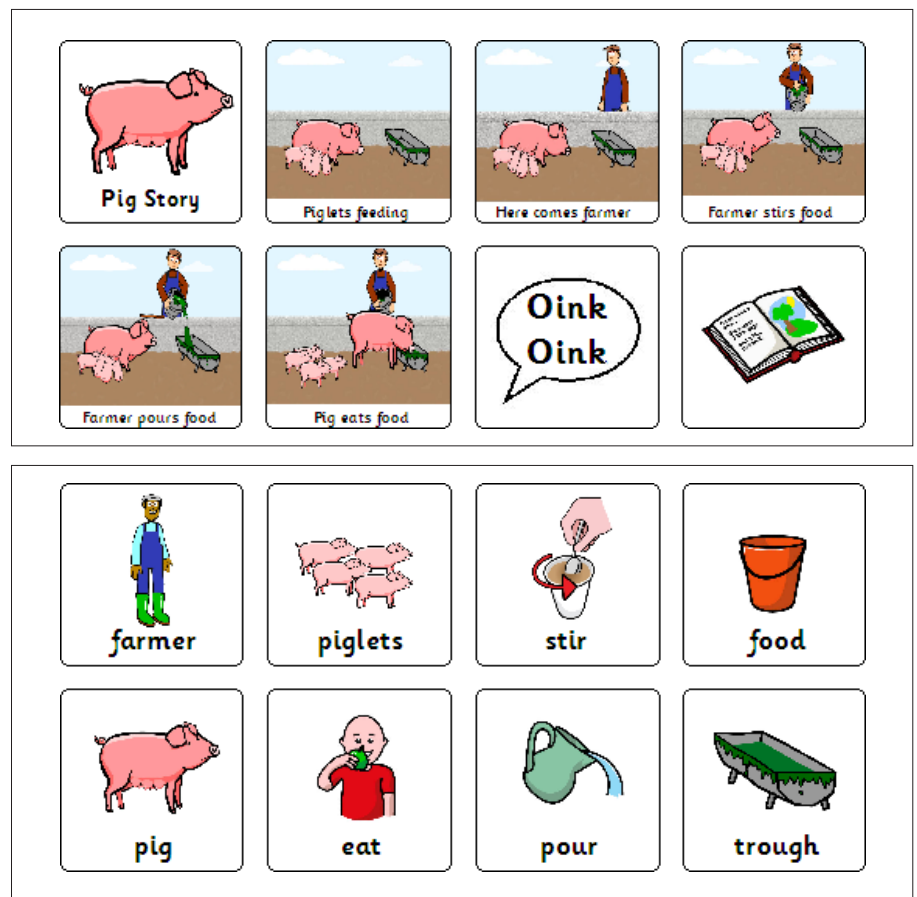


Figure 6 Screen shots from SwitchIt! Farm Extra 'pig story' and vocabulary chosen to re-tell story used on Tech/Scan 8

don't ask them to select a specific picture) and great practice for single switch timing or two switch access. It has the nice feature of speaking out the picture names as it scans, great for language input and auditory scanning.

In normal language development, once a child has gained an expressive vocabulary of 50+ words they acquire the ability to combine words together. This is not something we are presently encouraging with many of our AAC users at this level of development. Features such as the SwitchIt!s stories present very simple story formats that can help to extend ba-

sic vocabulary in contexts and can be used to model and encourage early word combinations.

Use the sequences of the story itself for the child to tell you 'something about the story' (avoiding using it for sequencing or answering specific questions) or use the main vocabulary used in the story for the child to tell you about the story. Using the communication aid yourself model how you might extend this language.

For example, the child selects 'pig'; the adult expands with "yes, the 'pig' is 'eat'ing".

TELLING STORIES

Creative writing/story telling plays an important part in education and language learning and provides lots of opportunities for extending vocabulary and linking words/concepts together.

It can also be really good fun! Software such as the Choose and Tell series provides a very simple switch accessible format with a series of errorless choices (i.e. there are no

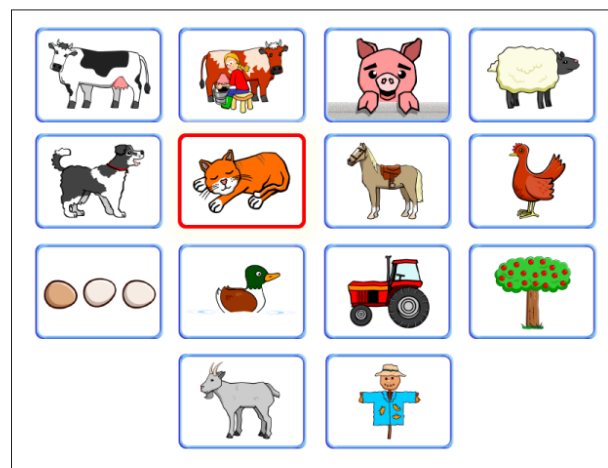


Figure 7 Picture menu from SwitchIt! Farm Extra picture builds

What am I?

I have 2 big wheels at the back.
The farmer drives me.
I help him plough the fields.
... Tractor

What am I?

I have four legs and a bushy tail.
I like to come out at night.
I will try to catch hens if I can!
... Fox

What am I?

I am small and round.
You can eat me.
Hens lay me.
... Eggs

What am I?

I have a trunk, branches and leaves.
I can grow apples.
Wood is made out of me.
... Tree

Figure 5 Scripts used for producing Fl4sh overlay for 'What am I?' question activity; answers in picture form put on separate overlay

right or wrong answers) that relate to each other to tell a story.

The beauty of this type of format is you can play the programme again and again and make a different story each time. Resources are provided with the Choose and Tell programs to use on communication aid overlays to tell stories away from the computer. With quick-change overlays you can easily move from choosing the character to choosing the location, treasure, monster and solution.

Away from the computer, you can also use this type of format to make your own 'stories' with vocabulary that is very relevant to the child, e.g. names of the children in the class as characters, locations from around school, 'treasures' found in the school bag, monsters in the form of teachers and solutions in the form of activities done in school. Aids that have four or more message locations and 'smart' overlays such as the Fl4sh, Smart/Scan (or the Go Talk 4+ for children who don't need switches) work well in this type of activity.

ROUTINES AND DAILY PRACTICE

Finally, making use of routines in the day and including the communication aid user in group activities around the interactive whiteboard or plasma screen can give the daily practice needed for switch users and early communicators. Software such as Smartboard or Inclusive's My Board can be used as a motivating visual support for many teaching activities.

Some teachers have found this software a great way to help pupils understand the structure of the day and use it for routine 'circle time' activities throughout the day. Although switch users may struggle to access the interactive screen to manipulate images, words and sounds, it is possible to use the images on the screen for communication aids so that they can participate to a similar extent as their peers. My Board, for example, has the facility to save the activity on screen as an



Figure 8 Screen shot from Choose and Tell Nursery Rhymes, showing character and choice of transport

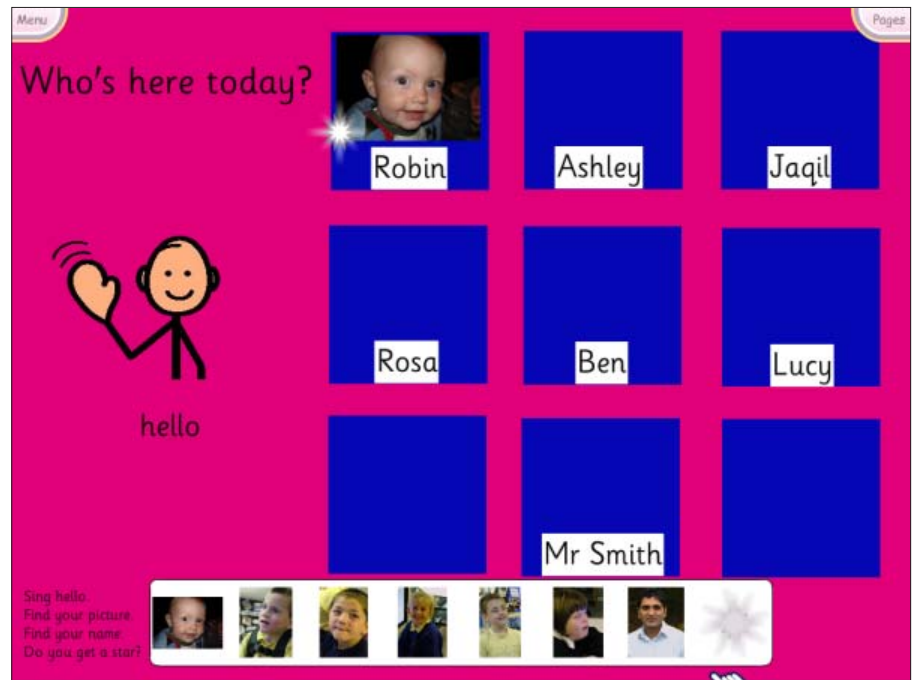


Figure 9 Registration activity using My Board software



Figure 10 Images used to make overlay on Boardmaker Activity Pad

image that can then be copied onto a communication overlay and appropriate messages recorded.

Even if the activity has definite right and wrong answers, sometimes it is okay to let the child make mistakes, just as speaking children do. However you can always pose a question differently e.g. if you are talking about days of the week, instead of asking "What day of the week is it?" you could ask "Can you tell me a day of the week?"

Your comments, ideas and further suggestions on the subject of developing com-

munication from cause and effect level are very much welcome.

Please feel free to email me at sandra@inclusive.co.uk *

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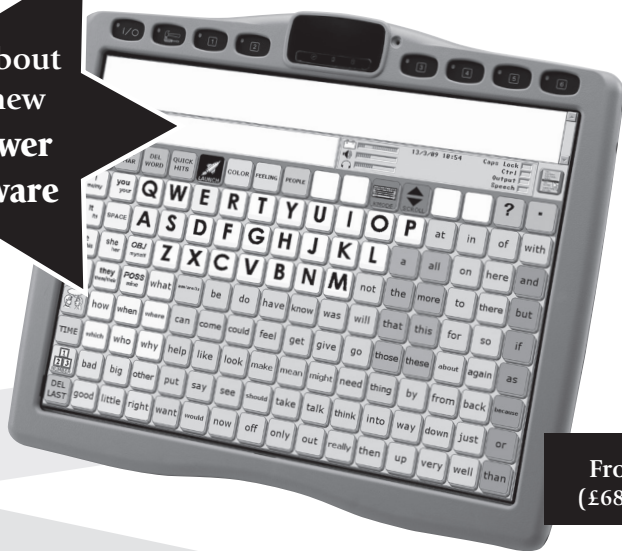
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Skype Network for Communication Aid Users

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INTRODUCTION

At the Communication Matters CM2007 National Symposium Zoë gave a presentation about communication mornings being held termly in South Yorkshire [1]. These communication mornings have proved very successful providing students using communication aids the opportunity to meet other students using communication aids from within South Yorkshire.

However, although highly successful, the communication mornings are only held termly as they have heavy organizational, transport and staff requirements to enable students from different schools to attend. The schools involved are keen to find ways of supporting peer interaction between communication aid users throughout the term. In addition, some of the students attending the communication mornings needed more age appropriate activities.

Around the same time, the Assistive Technology Team had been doing some work with Skype for other projects and the idea of using video conferencing for providing this link between users of communication aids was developed.

BACKGROUND

Research suggests that young users of Augmentative Alternative Communication (AAC) communication are skewed to-

wards interactions with adults [2] and that users of communication aids play passive roles in communication situations [3].

Figure 1 shows Sarah Blackstone's 'Circles of Communication Partners' for communication aid users [6]. Circle one people are defined as 'the person's life long communication partners', partners such as family members, spouse etc. who are very close to the person. Circle four are 'paid workers', for example teachers, care staff.

There is evidence to suggest that the distribution of communication partners is

skewed towards having a number of partners in circles one and four, with reduced numbers in the other circles [4, 5]. So one of the aims of the communication mornings held within South Yorkshire is to enable the students to experience more communication partners from the other circles, particularly circles three ('acquaintances') and five ('unfamiliar partners'). It was felt that using the video conferencing could provide another way of expanding these contacts as well.

As well as being exposed to different communication partners, users of com-

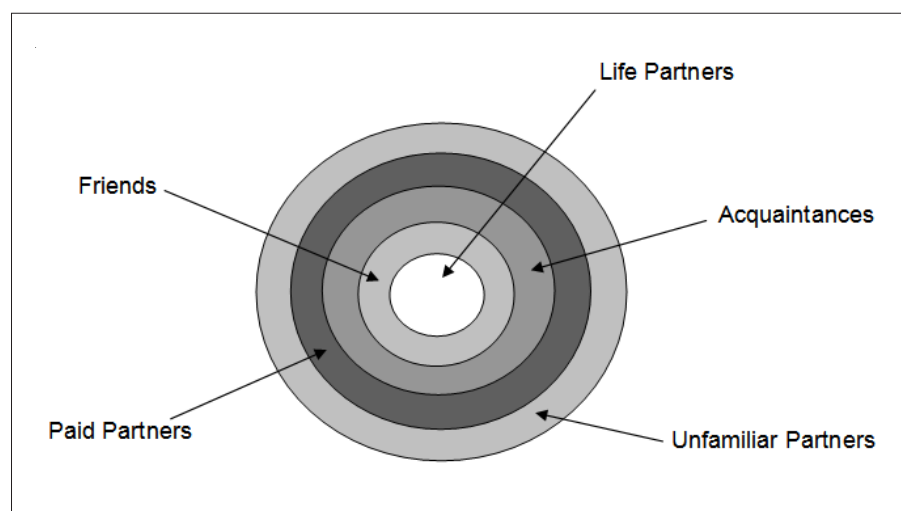


Figure 1 Sarah Blackstone's 'Circle of Communication Partners'

munication aids need to develop and practise communicative competence in order to achieve functional communication. Light [7] defined four domains of communicative competence, (linguistic, operational, strategic and social), in which users of AAC need to develop skills. Socio-linguistic and socio-relational skills form the social domain and include skills such as, turn taking, opening and terminating conversations appropriately, showing interest and being responsive to partners. Again these were skills which we felt could be practised using video conferencing.

In addition, it was felt that video conferencing could provide a way of exploring some of the other functions which some communication aids offer, and that using these other functions could provide additional motivation to the learners. This idea was supported by some recent research carried out by Light, et al [8]. Their research team asked children with no disabilities to come up with designs for communication aids. Interestingly the ideas which they came up with did not just focus on communication and had functions incorporated specifically around social interaction, e.g. joke telling and promoting positive social image.

VIDEO CONFERENCING

Initial thoughts around the potential of video conferencing as a tool for users of communication aids were as follows:

- It uses a modern technology which is attractive to older and younger users and is not disability specific, i.e. video conferencing is something anyone can use.
- It could provide the ability to meet peers who are not within the learner's own environment, with reduced staff and transport requirements.
- It could provide a 'real' environment in which to practise communication skills.
- That there may be lots of other potential applications for it, e.g. learning, meeting role models, etc.

Thinking about these thoughts and ideas suggested that video conferencing had potential and that it would be good to try. There are various video conferencing packages available but we initially decided to use Skype for a number of reasons:

- Skype is readily available and can be downloaded from a website for free.
- The software was familiar to Zoë who was coordinating sessions.
- The software is free and the setup costs are cheap. It will work with a cheap microphone and webcam.
- There is the possibility of accessing Skype via communication aids/

assistive technology, and some communication aids have ready prepared pages set up for Skype.

- Skype is secure.

Appendix 1 details the requirements for setting up Skype.

THE STORY SO FAR

Initial Session

A trial session was arranged for one of the communication mornings within South Yorkshire, one based at Greenacre School, Barnsley. During the session we set up Skype links between Barnsley and Penn Hall School in Wolverhampton, and between Barnsley and Portland College in Mansfield. At the Barnsley end the learners swapped in and out during the session. At Penn Hall the same learner stayed for about forty five minutes and at Portland College two learners stayed for about an hour.

The theme of the communication morning was meeting people and describing people so we applied this to the Skype sessions as well. Learners introduced themselves and then asked each other questions, e.g. "How old are you?"

The learners enjoyed the sessions. Different things were talked about, with a focus on football and computer games. Having the video link as well as the auditory link provided an important crutch to the conversation. The learners could see each other and so had more awareness of when someone was composing a message - this seemed to help support conversation and prevent breakdown. The video also enabled physical gestures, such as waving, to be conveyed which the learners also seemed to value.

There was a mixture of ages involved in the sessions. The learners from Portland College, both aged 20, spoke to learners from Heatherwood School, Doncaster aged 8 and 9. The participants did not seem worried by the age difference and found common topics to discuss.

The staff involved gave their feedback after the initial session. Portland College reported, "It was a really useful exercise in spotting holes in our learners' communication skills, and I can think of other learners who would get a lot out of this kind of thing, so if there are any other suitable times please let me know." This reinforces one of the initial thoughts that video conferencing could help support the development of some of the key skills for communicative competence.

In addition, Portland said "Thanks for setting up the Skype thing yesterday morning, [learners] loved it. I was won-

dering if we could perhaps start with a particular topic next time we do it? That way we can (a) pre-store/teach some words and phrases that may be useful. and (b) steer the lads away from football abuse!" This idea of having more structure to the sessions had been identified during the session. It was felt that it could be beneficial for learners to be able to familiarise themselves beforehand with potential vocabulary for a session. However, we are keen to facilitate, rather than to dictate, conversation. The football chat had been great at the initial session as it was of common interest, making communication easier and less pressured.

Penn Hall reported that "When our students communicate with their family and school, they can use a variety of techniques to get across what they mean. When using Skype, many of their communication methods will not work so they have to dig deeper and develop better use of their communication aid." Again this comment reinforced some of our initial thoughts: that using video conferencing could provide a more 'real' reason to use the communication aid.

Further Sessions

All involved felt that the initial session had been a success and were keen to hold further sessions. These have included one session between Wolverhampton and Barnsley, two sessions between Wolverhampton and Doncaster, three sessions between Doncaster and Barnsley, two sessions between Doncaster and Portland College and more recently two sessions between Doncaster and an adult with no disabilities.

These sessions have proved successful and to continuously build on experience from previous sessions. After initial sessions of general chat between locations, we have identified themes for sessions. We tried strategies like giving the learners questions to prepare to ask and answer so that they can take turns and gain confidence in asking and answering questions. The questions used are designed to then lead on to other topics or areas around the same theme. Other strategies have been to use activities such as playing music over Skype and then getting the students to express opinions about the music. Examples of themes include what people have planned for holidays, music and telling jokes.

Heatherwood School felt that it would be good for the children to speak to a range of people via Skype, hence expanding their experiences within the different Circles of Communication Partners. We have held two sessions between a school in Doncaster and an adult, Grahame

Robertson who is a recently retired headmaster of a special needs school. The learners were set a task to find out as much information about the person they were speaking to as possible, so encouraging them to ask questions and listen to the answers. These sessions have proved highly successful. Grahame is a keen collector of telephones and the learners were interested to hear about these and to see his telephone box in the garden! Following the session a couple of the learners were asking if they could speak to the 'telephone man' again. Their teacher commented that it was great that these learners were asking to 'speak' to someone whereas often they take a passive approach to communication.

FEEDBACK ON FURTHER SESSIONS FROM PORTLAND COLLEGE

A member of staff who has been involved in the further sessions at Portland College gave the following feedback:

"A small group of Portland College learners have been using Skype on a weekly basis, to communicate with other AAC users. Feedback has been good, with learners stating that have enjoyed having contact with other young people who face similar difficulties with their communication. Time has been spent on finding out interests and chatting about popular culture, for example TV, music and sports. Our learners have also shown interest in the different communication systems that other people use, whether they spell, whether they like their device, etc.

We have found Skype to be useful in supporting the development of general social skills, including turn taking, asking questions and making greetings, but as with all forms of non face-to-face communication there are little idiosyncrasies that can disjoint the flow of conversation! For example, when there is more than one person at each end we often get two learners speaking at the same time, or long pauses while learners compile their sentences, or answering a previous question in response to a new one. Learners take it all in their stride however, and are not disconcerted by these minor breakdowns in communication.

Aside from the odd technical hitch, for example losing sound on one occasion and visuals on another occasion (!), it has been a fun experience and we are looking forward to expanding Skype use to incorporate more learners in their AAC sessions."

This feedback highlights some of the benefits which we have identified in the further sessions, along with some of the challenges.

STUDENT FEEDBACK

Two learners from Heatherwood School in Doncaster were asked about their opinions of using Skype:

- They both enjoyed using Skype; one learner said "Yes, fantastic!"
- Both said they liked Skype for talking to other pupils from different schools and from different parts of the country.
- They were keen to use Skype to speak to children at other schools and also older children at college.
- One learner said that swimming was their favourite topic of conversation, and the other loved talking about "fantastic, fantastic, fantastic Arsenal".
- Both said that they would like to use Skype at home.

POTENTIAL USES OF VIDEO CONFERENCING

Since having the initial idea of utilizing video conferencing for users of communication aids, a number of potential ways it could be used have been identified.

Communication skills

As discussed above, video conferencing offers an opportunity for practising the skills required for communicative competence. In terms of peer-to-peer communication, these skills could be practised in structured sessions as part of the school day or as more social sessions at lunchtime or after school. We are currently in the process of trying to develop more of these social sessions. The aim is also for the more structured sessions to be less dependent on staff involvement, ensuring that the students are able to launch and run Skype independently.

Linking between users of communication aids in mainstream schools who may be one of only a few users within the school is another area that has been identified. One of the initial reasons for the termly communication mornings within South Yorkshire was to give such learners an opportunity to spend some time with other learners using communication aids. The learners who attend the communication mornings do report that they like this aspect of the communication mornings and so we feel it could be useful to develop using video conferencing.

We would also like to explore the possibility of linking with mainstream schools, again with a view to expanding the peer

network of the users of communication aids.

Transition

Portland College are particularly keen to use video conferencing during a learner's transition from school to college, and feel that there would be benefits of this for both the learner and the staff at the college. The learner would have an opportunity to meet, via video conferencing, the staff and potentially other learners who are currently at the college without heavy transport and time requirements. This could increase the learner's familiarity with the college staff and other learners, who could act as mentors and so reduce apprehension during the transition phase. In addition, the staff at the college could gain more knowledge about the learner, again helping with the transition.

Portland College feel that the use of video conferencing could also aid in transition from college when learners are moving on.

Keeping in touch

It can be difficult for learners with communication disabilities at residential schools and colleges to keep in touch with family and friends during term time. The same is true for learners during school holidays keeping in touch with friends. As mentioned, Skype has the advantage of being relatively cheap and easy to set up, so making it quite accessible for families with Internet access. Over the summer holiday in 2008 two learners from Heatherwood School were set up with Skype at home. They enjoyed being able to contact each other during the holiday as ordinarily they wouldn't have seen each other for that whole period. In addition, one of the boys uses it at home to contact other family members.

Role Models

As well as being able to keep in contact peers, the possibility of linking learners with adult users of communication aids and other role models is another possible application for video conferencing. The successful link up with Grahame Robertson has also highlighted the possibilities for linking with adults from different professions that are potentially relevant to the learner's current curriculum or career interests.

AAC City and Guilds

A number of learners using AAC undertake the AAC City and Guilds qualification. Unit 4 of the qualification is 'Using ICT for remote communication' so using video conferencing provides a good opportunity for practising and achieving the competences for this unit.

Computer Awareness

The use of video conferencing also provides an opportunity for learners to practise general computer skills (e.g. mouse skills, opening and closing programs) and provides a real reason for doing this rather than as a 'computer skills' task. As mentioned there are pages already set up on some communication aids for Skype access; utilizing these could also provide additional motivation for some students to use their communication aid more.

Staff

As well as the learners using video conferencing we also feel there is an opportunity for its use for peer support between staff at different sites. This could provide possibilities for technical support and sharing best practice, etc.

CONCLUSION

The work that we have done so far using Skype (video conferencing), has demonstrated it as a useful tool for enabling learners who use communication aids to interact with peers at different locations in the UK. It has also highlighted that there are a number of potential applications which could help learners develop communication, social and ICT skills. The learners who have been involved have enjoyed the sessions. They were keen to be involved in further sessions and have Skype set up at home.

In addition to the positive feedback, we have learnt strategies such as deciding topics beforehand. Although Skype is relatively easy to set up, as with all technology, technical difficulties can occur. However, these are usually quickly rectified and quite often doing a test call before learners arrive for a session can help to identify and sort out any problems.

Overall the initial sessions have proved successful and it is very rewarding to hear an activity described as "fantastic".

We are keen to widen the video conferencing network so if you are interested in finding out more or perhaps getting involved please email either of the authors.

We would like to thank staff and students at Portland College, Mansfield, Heatherwood School, Doncaster, Penn Hall School, Wolverhampton and Greenacre School, Barnsley. *

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Zoë Robertson

Assistive Technology Clinical Specialist

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APPENDIX 1 - REQUIREMENTS FOR SKYPE

The following is required to get started with Skype:

- computer;
- reliable Internet access;
- webcam;
- microphone;
- speakers or headphones (although speakers are better as they enable more than one person to hear what is being said at the other end);
- Skype account;
- willing guinea pigs!
- someone else to Skype with.

In order to maintain security it is important within the Skype settings to set it so that only people who you have added to the address book can contact you. Web safety issues must be considered when trying to enable learners to Skype more independently; educating learners about the importance of only contacting people who are in the address book, etc. would be part of this.



UPCOMING EVENT

FAMILY WINTER WEEKEND

13-15 November 2009

Blackpool

The Family Winter Weekend is for children up to 12 years old using (or working towards) high tech communication aids. The theme will be 'Celebrations' as it is 1Voice's 10th birthday!

Families should express an interest by emailing 1Voice. Application forms will be sent out on 1st September and families will be accepted on a first come, first served basis. Four places are reserved for new families and priority given to families who have attended less than four consecutive weekends. Volunteers and Role Models should email 1Voice as soon as possible to express their interest.

ABOUT 1VOICE

1Voice takes a family and social perspective on communication and recognises the great need for adult role models to inspire children and families alike. 1Voice promotes families supporting each other to overcome the isolation that being unable to speak can bring.

For more information, visit www.1voice.info or contact:

1 Voice, PO Box 559, Halifax
HX1 2XL Tel: 0845 330 7862
Email: info@1voice.info
www.1voice.info

Setting up AAC Services in Emerging AAC Areas

PRUE FULLER, CAROLINE GRAY, ANNE WARRICK, SARAH BLACKSTONE & HARVEY PRESSMAN

Email: admin@communicationmatters.org.uk

INTRODUCTION

The past three decades have witnessed the development and growth of a new speciality within the fields of education, speech-language pathology and rehabilitation medicine: augmentative and alternative communication, or AAC. AAC services can quite literally transform the world of a person with severe speech and communication difficulties. Yet, in many countries there is little or no understanding of this promising new field among the general population or local medical professionals, special educators, speech-language therapists and other professionals who work with people who have disabilities that result in complex communication needs (CCN).

Even where AAC services have emerged in one area of a country, they may be available only in a single school or urban hospital that is trying to serve a large population usually with very limited resources. A recent survey of developing countries listed many key barriers to AAC services:

- A lack of awareness of AAC.
- A lack of information about AAC.
- A lack of skilled professionals as service providers.
- Unawareness of possible access to skilled professional mentors.
- Limited AAC services.
- Limited training available for professionals, family members and people who can benefit from AAC services.
- Limited or no access to AAC materials and technologies.
- Limited funding for services and/or AAC materials and technologies.

- Limited access to linguistically/culturally appropriate materials/technologies.
- Unknown attitudes toward, and acceptance of, people with disabilities.

Individuals who try to develop AAC resources and services in emerging areas are often faced with a daunting task. How to get started? How to get around all these barriers? How to establish a 'beachhead' and then to 'scale up' in size and strength? How to benefit from the experiences of people in other regions who have faced the same kinds of questions? How to find, gain support and work with others so time is not wasted re-inventing the wheel.

This article is an attempt to put down on paper some of the kinds of questions and issues that need to be addressed to advance AAC in an area or region. Their ideas are not intended to provide any kind of formal roadmap or manual, but simply to provide food for thought to people who are trying to establish AAC resources and services in emerging areas. They include some questions to consider when preparing for and initiating action. Most importantly they recognize that each situation is different and that AAC services always exist within a unique political, economic, social and cultural climate.

PREPARING FOR ACTION

Considering possible answers to the barriers mentioned above may help identify both opportunities and obstacles to the development of AAC services for people with complex communication needs

(CCN) in an area/region/country. It is known that AAC services have emerged from different implementation models, such as dedicated individuals primarily working alone to set up AAC in a particular classrooms. Others have been able to find support in setting up AAC services from like-minded colleagues. In addition, some individuals have been assisted and advised by experienced AAC mentors from within and outside their own country. Consideration and discussion of the following questions applies to anyone interested in promoting a new AAC programme, since shared ideas and thoughts clarify situations that may impact new AAC developments.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE AREA/COUNTRY:

- How aware are people in the area/country about disability issues in general?
- What is the level of acceptance of people with disabilities?
- What are prevailing attitudes about disability?
- What formal structures (religious, cultural, political) exist that may impact efforts to develop services for people with CCN in the area/country?
- What facilities currently exist for people with disabilities? What groups do they target?
- Which educational, health and community organizations already work together in the best interests of citizens?
- What educational opportunities are available for children and youth with disabilities?
- Do services for adults with disabilities exist? What groups do they

address? What agencies address the needs of adults with CCN?

- Is there any effort to bridge the services available for children and for adults with disabilities?
- Is there a divide between the educational and healthcare systems in the area/ country? Between educational systems and the home?
- What is the general degree of awareness and knowledge about AAC in the area/country?
- What is the attitude to AAC in the area/country?

QUESTIONS ABOUT PEOPLE, ORGANISATIONS AND INSTITUTIONS

- **Are there relevant ministries/corporations/industry/professional groups/family members** that can be introduced to AAC to build a knowledge base, gain acceptance and obtain funding for AAC services?
- **Who** is interested, or might be interested in AAC within the country/area?
 - **People who use AAC themselves?** These are the most important individuals. However, by the very nature of people needing AAC, those able to campaign are not always a large group initially.
 - **Parents, other family members, personal assistants?** An important group in many countries. Historically parents have started many facilities for children with disabilities. Many of these centres have included AAC services.
 - **Professional assistants/aides?** Classroom assistants, respite care staff, nurses aides, nannies, etc.
 - **Professionals?** Teachers, speech and language therapists, doctors, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, social workers, researchers, pedagogists, psychologists, clinical engineers, manufacturers of assistive technology.
 - **Organizations or listservs for people who rely on AAC?** Augmentative Communication Online Users Group (ACOLUG), Speaking Differently, Pittsburgh Employment Conference (PEC). **International listservs** often available within countries and via the International Society for Augmentative and Alternative Communication (ISAAC).
 - **Administrators of schools, hospitals, clinics, etc.?** Leaders of organizations can make a big difference to how quickly and effectively AAC is introduced within settings.

- **Manufacturers of communication and writing aids?** With a small market and high development costs the products of all manufacturers require consideration.
- **Policy makers or interested parties with expertise?** Government officials and community advocates require information about AAC and the people who can benefit from it if they are to offer effective support.
- **University faculty members?** Professors and lecturers need to introduce AAC to their curriculum to prepare the next generation of AAC professionals.
- **Community leaders?** Individuals who may help and/or advise on fundraising, governmental liaison, legal issues etc.
- **International organizations?** The International Society for Augmentative and Alternative Communication (ISAAC) and ISAAC Chapters around the world; Central Coast Children's Foundation (CCCCF).
- **How much time can individuals in each group realistically give to a project to increase AAC services?** Within an emerging service, 'leaders' may need to delegate appropriate tasks to volunteers, advisers, etc. in order to maintain their own focus on AAC.
- **Are there universities, clinics, professionals, family members** who can offer professional training in AAC and how to use AAC technologies and materials?

QUESTIONS ABOUT AAC FACILITIES

- **Who will the AAC facility serve?** Children? Adults? People with developmental disabilities? Acquired disabilities?
- **Which disability groups will be served?** Cerebral palsy, developmental delay, stroke, head injury, autism, motor neuron disease, syndromes?
- **What are AAC service needs for rural populations?**
- **What are AAC service needs for urban populations?**
- **What are staffing needs in rural areas?**
- **What are the staffing needs in urban areas?**
- **What support facilities already exist?** For example, special schools, charities, health clinics, hospitals, community-based Rehabilitation (CBR) Centres, local facilities (e.g. residential homes), community centres and Clubs (e.g. Boy/Girl scouts, Boy/girl clubs), day care programs.

QUESTIONS ABOUT AAC INTERVENTIONS

- **What indigenous AAC related services currently exist?**
 - Does the deaf community have their own signing system? Are gestures or other signing systems available?
 - Are picture-based systems available? If so, which systems are being used?
 - Is any assistive technology available?
 - Are physical supports provided e.g. wheelchairs, special seats, walkers.
- **Are there technical universities/colleges/publishers/manufacturers that can help?** For example, to encourage development of presently available AAC/AT equipment, to develop materials that are culturally appropriate and affordable, or to repair equipment.
- **Are there repair and maintenance facilities available once assistive equipment becomes available?**
- **How are AAC services and resources going to be funded?**
 - Are services for speech therapists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, teachers paid? By whom?
 - Is any type of assisted technology funded? By whom?
 - Is fundraising support available?
 - Do stakeholders know how to get help from foundations, international granting agencies, etc.?
 - Do stakeholders know where to obtain help in writing funding proposals?
- **Who will be involved in AAC service start-up?** For example, professionals, assistants, volunteers, parents, advisors.
- **Where will the service be located?**

DEVELOPING A TEAM

Experience around the world has shown the benefits of a team approach when supporting individuals with CCN. Teams can be made up of the individual, his/her family and professionals from health, education, engineering and social services areas, in fact, anyone who would like to volunteer their help. Working on a team can have great benefits. It will take time to establish trust and confidence among team members and it is important to find the time to get together to have a strong, patient team leader. He or she is extremely important.

- **Is the child or adult who relies on AAC a member of the team?** He or she is the most important member and should always contribute to any team according to their ability to do so.

- **Do parents and family members play a major role on the team?** Family members, friends and caregivers usually know the person needing AAC better than anyone else and are excellent team members. For example, communication boards made by the parent and teacher together will contain vocabulary that a child can use both at school and at home.
- **Are team meetings centered on the needs of the individual?** Team members need to focus on the individual's strengths and communication needs when developing AAC goals for home, school, work and in the community.
- **Do team members keep each other informed about issues that affect AAC intervention?** This is an important requisite in team building.

For example; if a teacher spends time making a communication display to fit onto a child's wheelchair without knowing that the child is going to have a new chair provided by the hospital, time and money are lost.

SHARING EXPERTISE

By encouraging on-going communication – for example through organizations, websites and even by 'snail mail' – friends, colleagues and individuals who rely on AAC can work together to further the introduction of strategies, techniques and AAC technologies.

RAISING COMMUNITY AWARENESS OF AAC

Here are some examples of how people around the world have promoted AAC:

- **Ways to change negative attitudes about people with disabilities:**

- Invite people using AAC, wheelchair users *etc.* to the area/country.
- Show videos of people who use AAC. Translate into the languages of area/region/country.
- Obtain national television coverage, interviews, *etc.*
- Institute an AAC awareness raising week.
- Organize projects such as bake sales, festivals, pot luck dinners, *etc.* that include people who rely on AAC.
- Develop a link with international organizations (ISAAC) or Centres of Excellence (ACE Centre, Bridge School).
- Introduce role models (people using AAC effectively) so that people understand the power of AAC.

CASE STUDY: INDIAN INSTITUTE OF CEREBRAL PALSY, (IICP) KOLKATA, INDIA by Sudha Kaul

INTRODUCTION OF AAC SERVICE IN IICP: 1978

In 1978 our Centre, then called the Spastics Society of Eastern India, had children with Cerebral Palsy who were non-speaking and who needed a 'voice'. The introduction of our AAC service was part of the holistic approach we had/have to total intervention. It was, and is NOT a separate programme.

Our AAC programme started almost by accident when a member of our Board of Directors visited Canada and the Ottawa Children's Treatment Centre. There she 'found' Anne Warrick introducing AAC (Blissymbolics in those days) to students. Anne visited India and the following year friends in Ottawa sponsored me to visit Canadian AAC centres. On my return home to India our AAC programme began with a passion! Our Canadian support continues today along with support from a host of wonderful people through our ISAAC network; people who have come forward to support our training programmes since 1978.

There are some critical issues and challenges in developing AAC programmes:

1. Understanding the problem (demystifying AAC)
2. Finding solutions (training/teaching the local group)
3. Taking a pragmatic approach in implementing what is 'do-able' & practical within the cultural/economic context of the country (NOT being dependent on 'tech tools from outside the country.)
4. Teaching that low tech is as valuable and effective as technical devices.

THE NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTRE

We have now developed into the *National Resource Centre for AAC* in India. We have played a leading role in working with the Indian Government in introducing AAC to teaching colleges for professionals. We also work closely with technology colleges and are involved in R&D work in developing VOCAs and other software for people with

communication and access problems; developments that are appropriate for India. We have published books on AAC and developed the India Picture Symbols for Communication. The BoardMaker Indian Library has been developed by the staff of IICP. See www.iicpindia.org

Our two major challenges have related to the lack of understanding about AAC amongst all stakeholders, namely users of augmentative communication, professionals, their parents and the community as a whole and the lack of funding to develop tech/aids/training material. In spite of these challenges we have become the catalyst agency for AAC in India. Many more Centres of Excellence have now emerged. The ISAAC-India Chapter was formed recently and is based at a National Speech Institute in Mumbai. We, at IICP and throughout India, are good at networking and now have very competent professionals in India.

If I may offer advice to people who are thinking of starting an AAC programme in an emerging country I put forward the following:

- Think small. But DREAM BIG!
- Think what is do-able – identify what is manageable and what will be successful.
- Realise that AAC is NOT technology. Technology is just a tool. Communication is something we can all teach.
- Develop methods that are culturally & linguistically relevant to your own context. Have confidence that YOU KNOW BEST.
- Please do not look at AAC as a separate programme. It should be inclusive and therefore part of your intervention programme. In many developing countries we do not have the luxury of having different professionals specializing in AAC.
- AAC is NOT professionals/specialist dependent. It is PEOPLE dependent.

Sudha Kaul, IICP Vice Chairperson & Executive Director
Email: ssei@vsnl.com

- **Sharing Facilities** - A charity in Malta set up a Centre to be of benefit to the whole community. The swimming pool became also a hydrotherapy facility for people with disabilities. The Centre helps people with disabilities, including the limited ability to speak clearly, by providing access to AAC and adapted technology while offering the general public courses in Windows and the Worldwide Web.
- **Holding an AAC Awareness Week or Day** - In Poland, a school with children using AAC asked the local cinema to let them run a birthday party for Pooh Bear before a showing of the film. Children using speech output devices and signing ran the party from the stage and all the children in the town who attended were directed by the children using AAC, one boy came up and asked to try the speech output device.
- **Presenting Street Entertainment** - In India young adults, some of whom rely on AAC, have written a play that describes the challenges and potential of and for people with disabilities. To raise awareness of disability in the general public they perform their play in many school and community locations including street festivals.

MODELS FOR STARTING AAC PROGRAMME

Different approaches have been used successfully to initiate AAC services:

- **Top Down** - describes programmes originated within an established facility (e.g. university, hospital or school).
- **Bottom up** - describes a programme developed by a few dedicated people with little organizational support. Historically these programmes have often been initiated by parents of children with disabilities.
- **A Jump Start** approach initiates the growth of AAC through financial and training support. In Poland AAC services originated through UN support, while services in India, Singapore, South Africa and Poland were supported by the Bridge School in California, USA.
- **'Linking' within the field of AAC** - Membership in international organizations and networking offers advice and support for people starting AAC services. Organizations such as the International Society for Augmentative and Alternative Communication (ISAAC) and ISAAC Chapters, Augmentative Communication World Network (ACWN) and also Blissymbolics Communication International (BCI) offer information via their websites.

- **Involving Manufacturers** - Contact with AAC related manufacturers can provide support with both light and high technology.
- **Mentoring Schemes** - Some organizations (ACWN) offer mentoring opportunities by arranging for a colleague with AAC experience to support a colleague who is setting up an AAC programme in a developing country.

LAST WORDS

AAC is on the move. There are many emerging programs throughout the world, from Mexico to Malaysia, Peru to Belarus to mention just a few.

There are no hard and fast rules to follow when setting up an AAC service in an emerging country. No country and no individual gets everything right. There is plenty of scope for learning from and with each other. AAC services have been started by a single individual, a group of individuals, agencies, academic institutions and international organizations. Each model has had its challenges but the rewards repay all efforts in that ultimately people requiring AAC can communicate, participate and realise their unique dreams and aspirations. *

Prue Fuller, Caroline Gray, Anne Warrick,
Sarah Blackstone & Harvey Pressman

"They came back buzzing!"

- SEN ICT Manager

ACCREDITED TRAINING COURSES

- **Augmentative and Alternative Communication**
- **Assistive Technology**
- **Access and Control of Technology for Communication and Learning**
- **Recording** (using symbols, images, sounds and text)

Perfect for anyone working with people with complex communication needs and physical difficulties. All our courses have an emphasis on work-based practice and are accredited by MMU, so you can build up to a range of postgraduate qualifications, including a Masters. Undergraduate qualifications also available.

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WANT TO HOST A COMMUNICATION MATTERS ROAD SHOW?

The Communication Matters Road Shows are great opportunities to learn all about the latest communication aids and software from many of the UK's leading suppliers of AAC equipment and services - these suppliers are also Commercial members of Communication Matters.

Around 10-15 CM Road Shows are held every year at various locations in the UK - and they are free to participants!

At each Road Show, there are usually 10 to 12 companies presenting workshops. The workshops are given in parallel and repeated five times during the day - participants choose which of the five companies they wish to hear during the day.

We are always looking for new venues to hold CM Road Shows, so if you would like to host one in your area, please do let us know.

Communication Matters will handle much of the administration and organisation, including taking delegate bookings, and offer you a lot of help and advice along the way!

For more information, please ring Patrick Poon on Tel: 0845 456 8211 or you can send an email to admin@communicationmatters.org.uk



TRUSTEES' NEWS

FROM TOBY HEWSON, CHAIR

The Trustees have been busy behind the scenes throughout the summer, tying up all the loose ends before the CM2009 National Symposium on 20-22 September, and the Annual Meeting of Associate members on 20 September at Leicester University. Since the last edition of this Journal, we have had two meetings of Trustees in May and June. The principle items of business have been ensuring continuity, clarifying the process and timetable for finding a new Chair, reviewing our efforts with fundraising and how this might affect the Business Plan, and of course preparing for the Symposium and Annual Meeting.

We are continuing our discussions as to how we can help volunteers and the increasingly difficult time demands on Trustees. The reality of the current economic climate (and I know this from my work) is that many people are finding difficulty in allocating time to us. The voluntary sector is particularly vulnerable to this readjustment that is an almost inevitable consequence of the pressures on people no matter how much they want to do more. I was invited with two other Trustees and about 50 speech and language therapists to the Speaker's house to meet with John Bercow on 13 July 2009. John has been a good friend to us throughout the whole of time of the Bercow Review, and I am sure he will continue to keep a keen eye on Communication Matters as his Review is implemented.

We are awaiting the result of our two funding applications to the BIG Lottery Reaching Communities programme and the BIG Lottery Research programme. However, we have been told that we have got through to the second round (this is the first time we have managed to get this far!) and we hope to have some news by the time of the Annual meeting. But no promises!

As you know, I took over as Chair in April 2009. I have found the last months both challenging and exciting and I am satisfied that we have continued to move Communication Matters forward. I could not have even thought about undertaking this role without the help of all Board members and in particular the help, input and support of two of our former Chairs, Janet Scott and Janet Larcher.

As some of you will know, I have decided I will not be putting myself forward for election as Chair this year, as I need to concentrate on my work in JustDifferent. However, I have put myself forward to continue as Trustee for a further year because I want to ensure that the new Chair is supported properly. We have a big agenda to pursue and I also want to really make sure that the voices of disabled people are properly represented at all times on the Board of Trustees.

On behalf of all the Trustees, I look forward to welcoming you to Leicester in September.

Toby Hewson, Chair of Board of Trustees

eCAT NEWS

FROM DAVID WEATHERBURN

As this is my first news column as Chair of eCAT, I thought I would share with you my thoughts on the role of eCAT, its importance to the field of AAC, and our relationship with Communication Matters and other interest groups. I'll try not to repeat anything covered in previous eCAT NEWS!

WHY eCAT IS IMPORTANT TO AAC

For those of you who are new to Communication Matters (and as a reminder to everyone else), eCAT is the Electronic Communication & Assistive Technology section of the British Healthcare Trades Association (BHTA).

All eCAT members are also Commercial Members of Communication Matters. eCAT members account for the majority of the UK's high tech communication aid sales and support, and are: Dynavox, Liberator, Mounts & More, Possum, QED, SmartBox, Techcess and Toby Churchill.

BHTA is the UK's oldest and largest healthcare association (founded in 1917) and represents the interests of around 380 companies employing more than 17,000 people. BHTA has a broad remit – as well as eCAT, there are sections for Orthotics, Visual Impairment, Mobility, Prosthetics, Stoma & Continence, Beds & Support Surfaces, Rehabilitation, and many other product and service areas. You can read more at www.bhta.net

BHTA is growing and has been steadily increasing its influence within government, the civil service and media. We now have access to valuable new contacts through BHTA, as well as more credibility, which provides better opportunities for us to help lobby for improvements in funding and AAC awareness using different channels, and more easily raise concern about issues such as VAT and over-burdensome new regulations.

BHTA also is an excellent source of information for members, and runs seminars (e.g. on compliance) and training courses (e.g. its BTEC in Healthcare and Assistive Technology).

With BHTA now working towards full approval of its Code of Practice by the Office of Fair Trading, this should lead to higher standards amongst its member companies that will benefit not just those suppliers but also the people who use their services, adding value to the entire AAC field!

COLLABORATIVE

Suppliers are one of the main stakeholder groups in AAC, and invest significant sums of money in developing, producing and supporting AAC products and services. It is therefore vital that any initiatives led by eCAT are coordinated with those of Communication Matters, Scope, BECTa, RCSLT and others. Only in this way will we achieve the



eCAT

NEWS

best possible outcomes for people who use AAC, with more secure funding for support and equipment. So I look forward to supporting the important work already being carried out by Communication Matters Trustees, by Anna Reeves (in her new role as National AAC Coordinator) and others, and hope they will be able to contribute to any initiatives being led by eCAT.

We also have, between us, a large amount of data that could potentially be very useful in helping explain trends in spending on AAC equipment and services. For example, I presented pooled eCAT sales data during the Bercow review, which was helpful in showing the amounts spent on AAC during and post-CAP.

PRO-ACTIVE

It is still not clear what the real impact will be of the recommendations in John Bercow's Report and how quickly these will be implemented. One of our concerns as suppliers is that the momentum established before and during John Bercow's review should be maintained and built on.

Meanwhile, we will continue to explore and highlight other possible sources of funding, such as the 'levy' schemes operated in the USA and Portugal, which have been funding some assistive technology even though that is not their primary focus.

The eCAT members are also preparing a 'Position Paper' which will be presented to MPs, the media and others. It would clearly not be helpful if our Position Paper were to conflict with the message being promoted through separate initiatives being pursued by other people.

OUTWARD LOOKING

Another key role for eCAT is to help raise awareness of AAC and for its members to be available to people who are interested in finding out more about AAC.

Most of the eCAT members present at the regional Communication Matters Road Shows, and exhibit at the annual CM National Symposium. Most of us will be exhibiting at BETT and/or the Special Needs Fringe at Olympia in January. At Naidex 2010 next April we expect, for the first time ever, to have a dedicated 'Communication Village' – an exciting development which is being supported by Communication Matters. We are working with the Naidex organisers to ensure that the 'Village' has high visibility and is well promoted. If this approach helps us to raise the profile of AAC and attract a larger audience, we will aim to replicate the concept at other similar large events.

David Weatherburn, Chair of eCAT section, BHTA
Email: david@liberator.co.uk

PRESS

RELEASES

PROXTALKER NOW AVAILABLE IN THE UK

In the middle of a recession, one new American company has taken a bold step. ProxTalker.com LLC has chosen to deliver its exciting new communication aid, the Logan ProxTalker, in the UK and across Europe by setting up a UK based division, Logan Technologies.

Glen Dobbs, the company's president, said: "I am delighted to announce that Sandra Hartley has joined us to set up this exciting new venture. Our aim is to be closely in touch with what the customer needs and wants, ensuring a high level of service, delivery and product development."

The Logan ProxTalker is a portable, robust and easy to use communication aid, which exchanges pictures for spoken words. Developed initially for Glen's son Logan who has autism, a wide range of applications have been identified by Speech Pathologists in the USA since its launch last year, in areas of learning disability, stroke, head injury, amongst others.

Glen added: "Logan was a great user of PECS, the picture exchange communication system. However, I wanted him to be able to order his own burger when we went out at the weekend, but he had no verbal communication. There was nothing on the market that was easy enough for Logan to use and robust enough to withstand the rough handling I knew he would give it."

"We encourage people to try the device for themselves to find out if it is the right tool for the job. As a father myself I know just how important that is." To arrange to try a Logan ProxTalker or for more information email: sandra@logan-technologies.com Website: www.logan-technologies.com

*

TOBY CHURCHILL LTD APPOINTS NEW MARKETING DIRECTOR

In order to maximise its current success in the UK marketplace and grow export markets worldwide, Toby Churchill Ltd has appointed John Hicks as Marketing Director.

Located at the company's base in Over, Cambridgeshire, John's role encompasses sales and marketing activities for the UK and export territories including Australia, US, Canada, Europe and the Middle East.

John said: "This is a very exciting time to be joining Toby Churchill Ltd. Our latest product - the Lightwriter SL40 - is already selling well in the UK and we have recently launched it in a number of European languages. I am looking forward to communicating the significant strengths we can offer to our markets, both in the UK and overseas".

For more information, visit www.toby-churchill.com or tel: 01954 281210.



HOT NEWS

RADIO DJ USES EYE GAZE TECHNOLOGY



Bram, who has had Locked-in Syndrome since a bicycle accident 10 years ago, achieved a lifetime ambition by becoming a host DJ on a local radio station, Phonic FM, in Exeter this July.

Going by the name of 'DJ Eye Tech', Bram broadcast a show he had prepared entirely on his My Tobii eye gaze communication aid. Over many hours and weeks he 'typed out' with his eyes the show content and music choices, which were then recorded and edited together with sound effects to create the final version. It included a song which Bram himself wrote, using rap lyrics to describe his experiences of his condition, with his typical black sense of humour! Tony Walker at Phonic FM said: "His voice has been silent for all of the time he has had to live with Locked-In-Syndrome but now the whole world can hear him."

The show was a phenomenal success for Bram and Phonic FM, and positive feedback has flooded in. Bram will now be a regular feature on Phonic FM and the next show is to be broadcast on Saturday **26 September 2009** between 8-10 pm. Listen to it live on 106.8 FM if you live in Exeter, or online at www.thisisexeter.co.uk/phonic. If you miss it, don't worry, you can catch it again on Bram's own website www.eyelife.org, and also listen to his July show.

THE FSI CHALLENGERS

Four Associate members of Communication Matters donned their waterproofs and braved very wet conditions in the Derbyshire Peaks to raise money for Communication Matters.

They joined over 200 people to take part in the FSI (Foundation for Social Improvement) Challenge on the 6th June to walk or run a 4km or 10km course.

The Trustees wishes to thank **Alison Mackenzie** (above), **Katy Parnell**, **Susie Barritt** and **Jill Nage** for their generous support.

The next FSI Challenge will be on Saturday **5 July 2010** in Derbyshire - pencil it in your diary now!

Find out more about the FSI Challenge at www.thefsi.org/challenge-2009.html



WANTED REVIEWERS

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED TO REVIEW BOOKS/MATERIALS FREEBIES!

Jessica Kingsley Publishers (and occasionally other publishers) from time to time supply Communication Matters with publications for review. Generally, these are to do with different aspects of disability, including (but often not specifically) communication. Many of the publications and materials are autism related.

If you are prepared to write a short review of the materials for publication in this journal, then we are happy to give you the materials to keep.

The reviews that we seek are short, informal and practically based, not long academic criticisms. We will send a brief sheet of Guidelines to anyone interested in volunteering to write one.

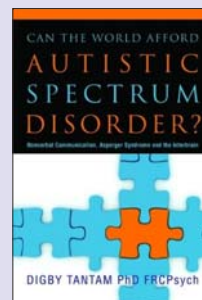
The latest materials currently looking for a reviewer and ultimately a good home, are:

Can the World Afford Autistic Spectrum Disorder?

Non-verbal communication, Asperger Syndrome and the Interbrain

Digby Tantam (Professor of Psychotherapy), 2009

Hard-back book, 256 pages, Jessica Kingsley Publishers

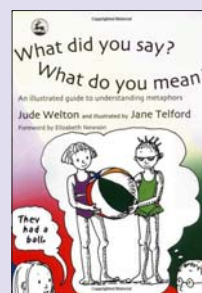


What did you say? What do you mean?

120 illustrated Metaphor cards, plus booklet designed to help children with Aspergers Syndrome learn and understand non-literal expressions.

Jude Welton (author), Jane Telford (illustrator)

Jessica Kingsley Publishers



Other Items for Review

There are other, older items also available, contact Sally Millar for a full list.

Due to lack of space at the Communication Matters office, these materials are currently being held in the CALL Scotland library until such time as someone volunteers to review them (reviewers can keep the item if they wish).

If you are interested, please contact Sally Millar at CALL Scotland: sally.millar@ed.ac.uk or enquiries@callscotland.org.uk



DIARY DATES

9-10 September 2009 Glasgow

Independent Living Scotland 2009

More information: www.independentlivingscotland.co.uk

20-22 September 2009 Leicester

CM2009 National Symposium

Contact: 0845 456 8211 www.communicationmatters.org.uk

7 October 2009 Bristol

Introduction to AAC

Contact: PCAS 0117 3533613 www.pcas.claremont.bristol.sch.uk

9 October 2009 Bristol

Introducing Clicker 5

Contact: PCAS 0117 3533613 www.pcas.claremont.bristol.sch.uk

13 October 2009 Oxford

AAC SIG: Raising awareness of AAC

Contact: Julie Atkinson 0121 6278235 julie.atkinson@sbpct.nhs.uk

14 October 2009 Oxford

Developing and Supporting Low Tech Communication Systems

Contact ACE Centre: 01865 759800 www.ace-centre.org.uk

16 October 2009 Bristol

Communicate: In Print 2

Contact: PCAS 0117 3533613 www.pcas.claremont.bristol.sch.uk

23 October 2009 Bristol

Boardmaker Training

Contact: PCAS 0117 3533613 www.pcas.claremont.bristol.sch.uk

26 October 2009 Livingston, Scotland

SIG – AAC (Scotland) Study Day

Contact: Jane Donnelly 08451 555555 jane.donnelly@fife.gov.uk

5 November 2009 Edinburgh

Creating Communication Friendly Schools

Contact: CALL Scotland 0131 651 6235 www.callscotland.org.uk

DIARY DATES

11 November 2009 Manchester

Communication Matters Road Show in Manchester

FREE Tel: 0845 456 8211 www.communicationmatters.org.uk

12 November 2009 Oxford

Control, Communication and Play

Contact ACE Centre: 01865 759800 www.ace-centre.org.uk

23 November 2009 Bristol

Communication Matters Road Show in Bristol

FREE Tel: 0845 456 8211 www.communicationmatters.org.uk

30 November - 1 December 2009 Coventry

RAatE 2009

More information & book online: www.raate.org.uk

1, 2 & 3 December 2009 Edinburgh, Aberdeen & Glasgow

Communication Matters Road Shows in Scotland

FREE Tel: 0845 456 8211 www.communicationmatters.org.uk

2 December 2009 Bristol

Switch-On!

Contact: PCAS 0117 3533613 www.pcas.claremont.bristol.sch.uk

10 December 2009 Edinburgh

Low Tech Aids to Communication

Contact: CALL Scotland 0131 651 6235 www.callscotland.org.uk

11 December 2009 London

Communication Matters Road Show in London

FREE Tel: 0845 456 8211 www.communicationmatters.org.uk

21 January 2010 Edinburgh

Personal Communication Passports

Contact: CALL Scotland 0131 651 6235 www.callscotland.org.uk

20-22 April 2010 Birmingham

Naidex 2010 at the NEC Birmingham

More information: www.naidex.co.uk



NATIONAL SYMPOSIUM

20-22 SEPTEMBER 2009 UNIVERSITY OF LEICESTER

The Communication Matters / ISAAC (UK) National Symposium is an annual event embracing a wide range of issues relating to augmentative and alternative communication.

The two and a half day event provides a forum to meet and to exchange information with representatives from all disciplines associated with AAC, including people who use AAC and their family members.

SYMPOSIUM PROGRAMME

Plenary Speakers: Prof Pam Enderby, Melinda Smith, Sally Chan & Doug Bott
Over 60 presentations; exhibition with 20 leading UK suppliers of AAC equipment & services; social events

BOOKING FORM & INFORMATION

Visit www.communicationmatters.org.uk
Tel: 0845 456 8211
Email: admin@communicationmatters.org.uk



Research and Beyond

A study of two graphic symbol teaching methods

LAILA EMMS

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Email: laila.emms@treloar.org.uk

INTRODUCTION

This research project considered the teaching of symbols to children with cerebral palsy and additional learning difficulties with the aim of establishing an effective symbol teaching method within a large educational environment. The first half of this article aims to summarise the findings of the project in a deliberately brief manner, devoid of excessive statistical data.

The second part discusses resources and ideas developed as a result of the study and those which have influenced current working practice at Treloar School, where the study took place. The second part of this article is very much a personal reflection of my research and the impact it has had on my own working practices.

There are also some practical suggestions for teaching symbols which have evolved as a direct result of this study. For those with an interest in statistical data and methodological issues, a full report of this study is to be published in *Child Language Teaching and Therapy*. Emms, L., & Gardner, H (in Press): *A Study of Two Graphic Symbol Teaching Methods for Individuals with Physical Disabilities and Additional Learning Difficulties*.

BRIEF STUDY OUTLINE

The study described here was undertaken in part requirement for an MSc. in Language and Communication Impairment in Children at the University of Sheffield. The primary purpose of the study was to establish whether contrasting teaching methods had an effect on performance accuracy in the recall of graphic symbols. The secondary purpose was to establish whether the iconicity of symbols had an effect on performance accuracy. Two contrasting teaching methods were investigated using a total of 72 symbols.

A total of 14 children with cerebral palsy, severe physical disabilities and additional learning difficulties took part in this study. The children comprised two classes. Class 1 mean age = 9:2, Class 2 mean age = 15:8. Two symbol teaching methods were chosen for the purpose of the study: direct teaching (very explicit, formal, teaching) and a contextual method of teaching (teaching through the use of story telling and questioning).

A total of 72 Picture Communication Symbols (Johnson, 1985) were taught to each participant. The symbols were divided into those considered to be 'transparent' and those considered to be

'translucent/opaque'. All the symbols were taught to all the children, half through direct teaching and half through contextual teaching.

The data was collected at three points in time for each teaching method:

1. Initial assessment, prior to teaching.
2. Post intervention, directly after teaching.
3. Final assessment, one week after teaching.

The initial data was analysed by symbols (N=72), not by children (N=14), although later analyses using more descriptive methods proved to highlight interesting differences between the two classes.

RESULTS

The quantitative data analysis suggested that averaging across all other factors, the direct teaching method was a more effective teaching method and that performance accuracy was greater with transparent symbols. The gains noted following the direct teaching method were particularly strong and results from this study indicate that a direct teaching method could be a powerful strategy for increasing symbol vocabularies. The

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dedicated to communication

For over 35 years Toby Churchill Ltd has been providing dedicated communication aids that enhance the speed and scope of independent communication skills for users.



Our latest model, the **Lightwriter® SL40**, is the first in a new generation of Lightwriters that are changing users' lives. Light but robust in design with high quality Acapela voices, the Lightwriter® SL40 allows the user to carry out different activities from the same device including speaking, writing notes and even sending SMS text messages.

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dedicated to communication

For more information contact: **Toby Churchill Ltd.**
Norman Way Industrial Estate, Over, Cambridge CB24 5QE
01954 281 210
info@toby-churchill.com www.toby-churchill.com



Mel with her SL40

Meet Mel Smith...

Mel is a community development worker based in Melbourne, Australia. She has a passion for poetry and art and has already published three books to date. Mel combines the use of electronic communication devices such as the Lightwriter® and computer technology to illustrate just how creative communication can be.

Toby Churchill is pleased to assist with the travel arrangements associated with Mel's plenary speech at CM2009.



CM2009 - Highlights

Monday 21 September, 2.30 - 5.35pm:

Catch the Dream

Mel (with support from Sandra Hartley & Liz Moulam) will be holding a workshop for people who use AAC.

Monday 21 September, evening entertainment:

The Right Stuff

Join us for a fantastic party. See two amazing musical shows in one night. Get on board the 70's love train and remember, grease is the word!

Tuesday 22 September, 9.00 - 10.00am:

Dreaming of a Work-Life Balance

Mel kicks off the morning with her plenary speech.

results also showed that the translucent/opaque symbols were more successfully taught using the direct teaching method. There was a highly significant increase in the recall of symbols from initial assessment to post intervention, followed by a predictable drop at final assessment. Importantly however, despite this drop, the number of symbols recalled at the final assessment remained significantly higher than the number of symbols recalled at the initial assessment.

In addition to the quantitative data analysis, data was also analysed by class (class 1 N=7, class 2 N=7). Here it became apparent that there were marked differences between the two classes.

Teaching method	Class 1	Class 2
contextual	1.9	8.0
direct	10.3	5.2

Table 1 Average number of symbols gained from initial to final assessment

The table above clearly shows that Class 1 (mean age 9:2) showed a preference for the direct teaching method, recalling an average of 10.3 more symbols on final assessment. Perhaps more importantly however, was the fact that following the contextual teaching method, Class 1 was only able to recall an average of 1.9 more symbols. Meaning that after three hours of teaching the participants were able to recall less than 2 symbols. This failure to recall symbols following the contextual method of teaching was an important finding and one which has influenced current working practice at Treloar School. Class 2 (mean age 15:8) did not however show such marked preferences. The results indicated an average increase of 5.2 gain from the direct teaching method and 8.0 for the contextual teaching method, suggesting that as group they displayed a slight preference for the contextual teaching. These differences were not obvious when the data was analysed by symbols (N=72) and illustrates the importance of looking at data from different perspectives.

The results of this study should not be considered an exclusive guide to teaching symbols but elements of this study could be used to inform teaching and therapy practice. The differences between the two groups is a reminder that as children mature, their methods of learning change and as educators and clinicians we have a duty to adapt and change to their needs. As a result of this study, the learning of symbols at Treloar School is never 'assumed' and great efforts are made to increase direct teaching

opportunities, especially when considering the more translucent/opaque symbols.

BEYOND RESEARCH

During the preparations for the study it became obvious that assessment of the symbols used would be critical to the study and therefore an assessment tool was needed. As no commercial symbol assessment tool existed it was necessary to develop one. This assessment tool has subsequently become a useful tool and is currently used throughout the school both by speech and language therapists and teachers. During the course of presenting this study, interest in this assessment tool became apparent and for this reason it is discussed here in greater detail.

SYMBOL ASSESSMENT

The assessment was designed with each target symbol presented on a single A4 landscape page. The page was split into quarters and the target symbol appeared alongside three distractors. Placement of the target symbol was randomised.

In a study by Chiat (2000), the presentation of target symbols accompanied by a semantic distractor and a phonological distractor is suggested as an appropriate design for an assessment tool. Mizuko's study (1987), presented target symbols alongside three symbols within the same semantic category. For the purposes of this study it was felt that Chiat's concept of semantic and phonological distractors would be appropriate with the addition of an unrelated distractor, used here as a 'red herring'. This methodology makes 'error analysis' possible following the assessment, which has also proved useful.

This assessment tool is currently used with new students at the beginning of the school year to establish a baseline of core symbol knowledge and is used again at the end of the first academic year. The core vocabulary at Treloar School currently comprises 45 Picture Communication Symbols (Johnson, 1985). It is acknowledged that the assessment itself only establishes the ability to identify a target symbol from a selection of four and development of an assessment showing the use of symbols is currently in progress.

CORE VOCABULARY

During the presentation of this study a question often asked has been about the selection of core vocabulary. A speech and language therapist, teacher and communication support specialist selected the original core vocabulary by identify-

ing symbols they thought would be critical in the school environment. Because the school is residential most of the symbols fall into the category of basic needs or feelings (hungry, thirsty, happy, sad, angry) with symbols such as 'homesick' included. Our core vocabulary has been adjusted from time to time to suit the needs of the students but it has not changed significantly from the original selection. It was felt that the symbols should be appropriate to the environment and that meeting the basic needs of the children came before education in the classroom could begin. The 45 core symbols chosen have been incorporated into the assessment discussed above. To extend this symbol vocabulary, topic specific symbols are being added for all curriculum subjects. Although the symbols are 'topic specific' they are designed to be useful across all areas of the curriculum. This will extend the vocabulary to approximately 80 symbols.

There have been a number of benefits to the development of our own core and topic specific vocabulary. Beyond the obvious benefits of a baseline assessment tool, we have found the core vocabulary to be a very good starting point, not only for students but also for teachers. When teachers are more aware of the vocabulary that a student has access to, they can formulate questions more appropriately. The benefits of asking open questions are well documented, but knowing what vocabulary is available for answering is critical to achieving this. Knowledge of the core and extended vocabularies provides this information and reduces the need to use closed questions. New teachers have found the core vocabulary a helpful tool to start from and develop topics around it knowing that the student will have some understanding of the symbols and concepts being discussed. Constant reinforcement and exposure to symbols around the school assists learning for both staff and students and raises the profile of symbols.

Consistency in the use of symbols is of course critical at this stage. Designating responsibility for the development of a core vocabulary and ensuring consistency of use of symbols has helped us in this process. Once a core vocabulary has been selected, maintaining consistency is not easy especially if you work in a large establishment.

TEACHING

The results of this study suggest that translucent/opaque symbols are more successfully taught using a direct teaching method. Deciding which symbols are transparent, translucent or opaque is a difficult task and somewhat subjective.

Loncke & Lloyd (1999) suggest that symbols that can immediately be recognised are processed differently from symbols that are not immediately identifiable and that the skills required to 'decode' these more complex symbols are similar to the skills required for reading. It is now generally accepted that symbols deemed to be transparent are more easily learnt, and the results of this study support this.

Mirenda and Locke (1989) suggest that transparent symbols do not need to be learnt because of the obvious link to their referent but also advise that research is needed to confirm this with relation to disabled learners. Our study would suggest that this is not necessarily the case for children with disabilities. The key point here is the interpretation of 'transparent'. Children with disabilities often have much reduced experiences, which impacts on their language. A symbol only represents its referent if the observer has had experience of, and therefore recognises, the referent. Many children with physical disabilities have reduced experiences and the impact of this on their language skills should not be underestimated.

The teaching of symbols at Treloar School is a shared responsibility and one that takes place in all environments - classroom, therapy and residential boarding house. However, following the results of this study translucent/opaque symbols are now taught through a more explicit teaching method, particularly in the junior school. If children are expected to express themselves using symbols they need to be given every opportunity to learn and use symbols, whether they are using a communication book, chart or high tech communication aid. The issue remains the same: children still need to know what the symbol means in order to use it, and they need to be given maximum opportunities to achieve this.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

A quantitative research study requires absolute consistency of both teaching methods throughout the course of the study and for this reason it is acknowledged that the contextual teaching method was somewhat compromised in this respect. The main purpose was to evaluate 'contrasting' teaching methods to see if there was any significant impact on the ability to learn symbols.

This study has suggested a probable correlation between age and teaching methodologies of symbols. The fact that the younger children failed to make any gains following the contextual teaching was a highly significant finding and has directly affected teaching practices at Treloar School. A direct teaching ap-

proach is now recommended for the teaching of symbols to younger children. As always, further research is needed before we can conclude that age is as significant as this research may suggest. However compelling the results appear, in terms of statistical data, this study is relatively small, and because of this it remains difficult to be confident in the findings (Cohen, 1992). Caution should therefore be exercised when considering the extent to which the results can be generalised to the larger population.

CONCLUSION

The hypotheses considered in this study were that direct teaching would result in more symbols being recalled and that transparent symbols would be easier to recall. The results consistently support both hypotheses.

It is apparent that no single teaching method alone can facilitate the needs of all children. However, when considering this type of population within the educational environment there are some methods that may be more beneficial than others and direct teaching may be a powerful teaching method.

Selecting a core vocabulary and devising a corresponding assessment has been a useful tool developed from this project. Even if the vocabulary changes, it is a good starting point and helps focus on consistency of use of the selected symbols.

"SO WHAT?"

Since the completion of this research study in 2006, I have now had time to reflect on the results and to address the 'so what?' element of this study. Having been 'encouraged' by colleagues to present this research at CM, I have had many useful conversations about the teaching of symbols and realise that there is little benefit in research if it isn't shared and discussed in open forums. And, that it isn't necessarily the results that count, but what was learnt along the way.

I have considered the practical benefits of some of the tools developed as a result of the study and those that I now realise have changed my working practice, and appreciate that it's just as important to share this information as it is the formal results. On reflection, beyond the research study itself, the indirect benefits of the study have been:

- establishing a core vocabulary;
- development of a baseline assessment;
- development of a strategy for teaching symbols.

Of the many discussions I have had with colleagues following this study, there are three questions that always top the list:

1. WHAT symbols should I teach first?
2. HOW should I teach symbols?
3. WHO should teach symbols?

As is often the case with research (I am told), I have more questions than answers but the following table attempts to address these three questions. The suggestions are the practical results of the work involved in setting up and delivering this study.

Many other symbol teaching opportunities exist and the more symbols are used within the environment the greater the learning opportunity. Using symbols for review contributions, signs, menus, school rules, fire regulations are all good ways of using symbols within the educational environment but consistency of use of symbols is paramount.

The ability to learn a symbol should never be 'assumed'. There are many considerations which should inform your chosen teaching method. Starting with WHAT, HOW and WHO may not be rocket science but it is a starting point. For many aug-

WHAT symbols to teach?

- Select a small vocabulary of core symbols suitable for your environment.
- Develop an assessment tool to use as a baseline and measure symbol learning.

HOW to teach symbols?

- Consider the 'type' of symbol (transparent, translucent, opaque) and consider the language, experience and age of the student. Select a teaching method appropriate to these considerations.
- Younger children with less language and life experience may benefit from explicit teaching.
- Older children may benefit from and enjoy a more contextual teaching approach.
- Expose staff to symbols to increase awareness of core vocabulary and maintain consistency across the environment.

WHO teaches symbols

- Teaching & learning support staff
- Therapists
- Care staff

Table 2 Questions and Suggestions

mentative and alternative communication users the use of symbols is critical to their language development.

Only through the use of language can we learn about language and through the use of graphic symbols, AAC users are afforded opportunities to increase their communication skills and influence the environment around them. Providing effective teaching methods to achieve this is crucial and bringing together the evidence of previous studies from both the educational and therapeutic fields may

help in developing new effective strategies for AAC users. *

Laila Emms

Communication Support Specialist

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Talk to the Hand!

Age appropriate communication activities

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INTRODUCTION

At the Communication Matters CM2007 National Symposium, our team presented a paper on the communication mornings we had been holding in South Yorkshire [1]. In that presentation and paper we discussed that the main aim of these communication aid mornings is to enhance peer interaction between communication aid users and to give a different environment for developing functional communication. These mornings have been very successful but they take a large amount of organisation and have high staff and transport requirements. Therefore the mornings are only held termly.

One of the schools involved in these mornings is Greenacre School in Barnsley. Students from Greenacre had attended some of the communication mornings and had enjoyed them.

However, one student in particular, had reported that she would like more teenage activities at the communication mornings.

It had been proposed that a weekly communication group be held at Greenacre for students at the school using communication aids giving a more regular opportunity for the students to get together. We also felt these sessions would be a good opportunity to look at more age appropriate activities. Actually, we thought that if we didn't try to look at these activities we might not have a group

for long, as the students wouldn't be motivated to attend.

COMMUNICATION GROUP

The communication group at Greenacre meets on Monday mornings between 10am and 11.30am. Overall aims were set out for the group when it was initially started. These are:

- Practise communication skills
- Model to and train staff in all aspects of AAC support
- Non communication use

To clarify, we used the term 'non communication use' to cover consideration of additional functions of students' communication aids other than communication (e.g. playing music, using computer and/or mobile phone functions). Exploring these functions can provide important motivation for the students to use the communication aid, can provide topics for conversation (e.g. music), and can enable access to functions used by people without disabilities (e.g. texting).

A recent paper by Light et al [2] suggests that considering these other functions is important. The research team asked children with no disabilities to develop designs for a new communication aid. The idea of this research was not to come up with finished designs for a new device but to look at what the children designed and the features which they had

incorporated. The children came up with ideas of devices that did not just provide communication support but that would also support social interaction and give a positive social image. The children also had ideas to design in the ability for the aids to perform 'great feats' to make the user 'cool'.

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDENTS

Within the group there are three teenage girls who are keen to have more age appropriate activities.

Miss X now uses a Liberator 14 (she previously used a Pathfinder). She uses a 144 LLL map and combines use of that with spelling. Miss X accesses the Liberator 14 directly with a keyguard. She is able to independently modify pages and add vocabulary. She is very keen to meet other teenagers and is interested in using mobile phone, MSN, iPod, etc.

Miss Y uses a Powerbox running the Grid 2 accessed via the touchscreen. She uses a combination of WordPower, spelling and word prediction with some symbol based pages. Miss Y has recently started editing and creating her own grids. Miss Y is very sociable and is interested in music, television, etc.

Miss Z uses a Vantage with Picture WordPower 45 which she accesses using a single switch (and she is experimenting with a head mouse). Miss Z is more passive and less confident than the other two students and has difficulties with initiat-

ing. She is interested in clothes, music and television.

As well as the overall aims of the group discussed above, further aims were identified for the students and for the staff attending the group with the students. Below are detailed the general student aims. Each student also has individual targets for the group attendance.

GENERAL STUDENT AIMS

Communication targets:

- Using a wider vocabulary, sentence building, developing peer relationships, initiation.
- Targeting age and peer appropriate vocabulary and sentence structures.
- Joint target setting for individual based on the 4 domains of communicative competence [3].

Non-communication targets:

- Accessing Internet, accessing mobile phone, accessing music, emailing, printing recorded work, word processing.

Communicative competence [3] was a main focus for the communication aims for the students within the group. Janice Light details four domains (see Figure 1) in which AAC users need to develop and practise skills in order to achieve communicative competence.

Communicative competence goes beyond a person being able to generate a message on a communication aid and speak it out. The four domains that make up communication competence are: Operational; Linguistic; Strategic; and Social. This model was explained to staff assisting AAC users at the initial session and was constantly referred back to when targets were set. Staff were able to identify which of the four domains needed developing, and skills within that area. A visual model was provided (see Figure 1) and staff and students were encouraged to write on their own targets.

When setting up the group it had been identified that each student would need to attend with a member of staff from class, both to ensure sufficient support for the student, and to enable the staff within the class to become more aware and confident in the use of the communication aids the students they support use. The hope was also that this would enable carry over of practising some of the communicative competence skills in class as well as at the group. So, in addition to student aims, the group also has aims for the staff who attend.

STAFF AIMS

- Practical use of the devices.
- Ideas of age-appropriate chat topics.

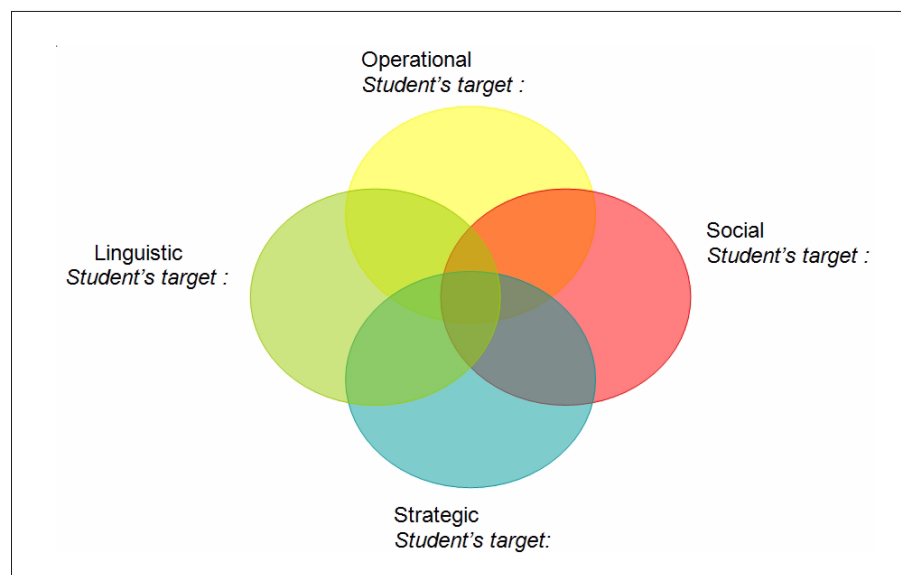


Figure 1 Four Domains of Communicative Competences with Individual Targets

- Use of age-appropriate vocabulary.
- Carry out tasks during the week, not just at the communication group.
- Raising/raised awareness of AAC communication.

ACTIVITIES

Having established the group and the aims of the group it was necessary to consider the activities and how they could be age appropriate and meet the aims of the students.

To give the sessions structure, a theme was chosen for each half term with activities devised that were appropriate to the theme. In the following section the themes and activities will be briefly described. A large number of these activities are not particularly novel however we carefully considered how we could make them age appropriate and also try to create a real reason to com-

municate and practise the skills of communication. For each of the themes, we considered the overall linguistic, social and strategic aims.

MUSIC

Music spans all ages and expressing opinions about music can be motivating. The aims of the music activities were as follows:

- Linguistic aim – to use descriptive vocabulary, to express opinions.
- Social aim – to communicate directly with a peer and develop reciprocity in conversation.
- Strategic aim – to use clues for vocabulary that was not pre-programmed.

Music activities

- Music playing game (see Figure 2) – for this game we had six stored pop

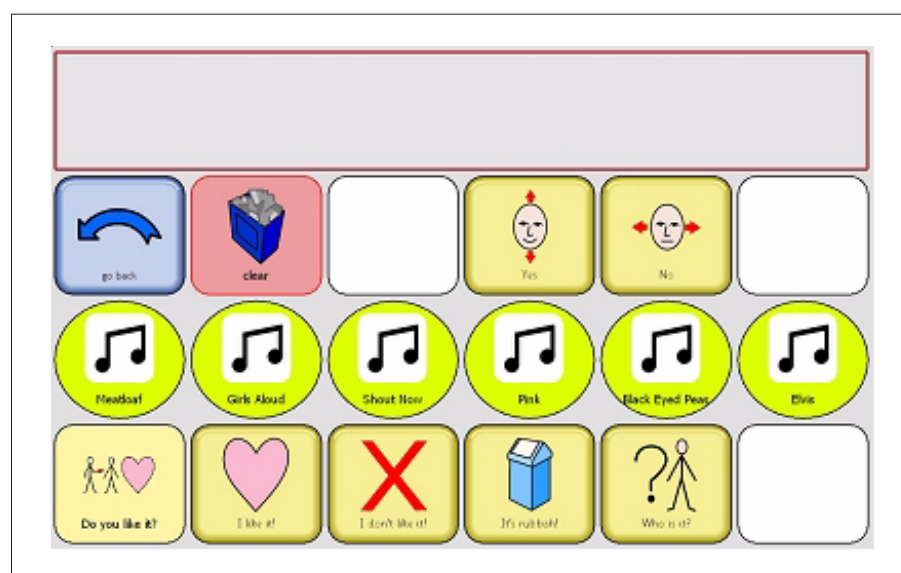


Figure 2 Music Game Grid

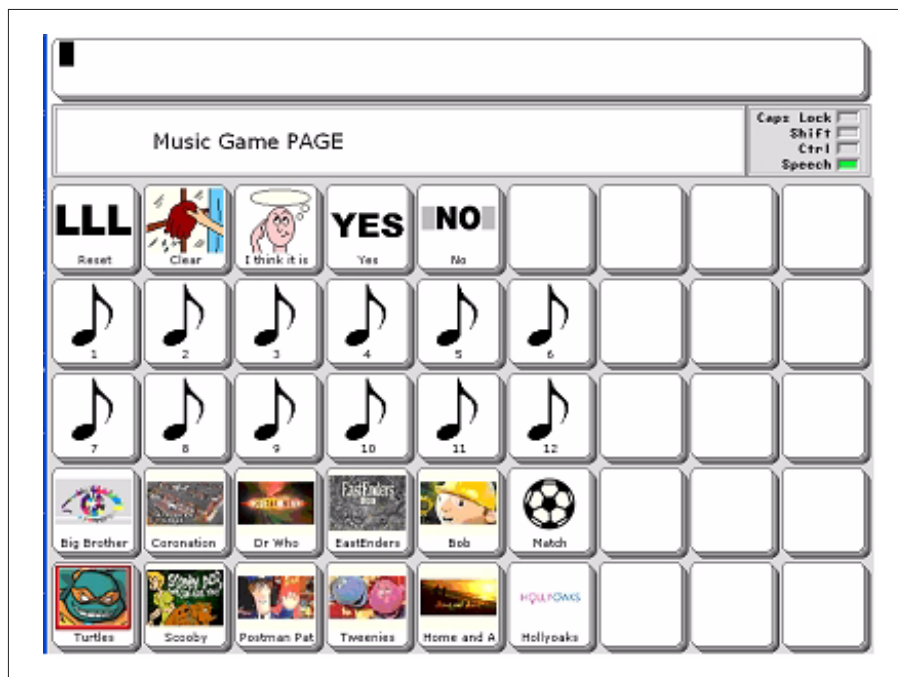


Figure 3 Theme Tune Game Grid

songs on a grid within the Grid2 or a page on the PRI devices. In addition, there were some stored phrases: yes; no; do you like it; I like it; I don't like it; it's rubbish; who is it?

The students took it in turns to play one of the songs and then the others could say what they thought about it. This was a popular game and the students were keen to have the names of the artists added on and students who had other music on their communication aids played some of these songs as well and the conversation continued.

- Theme tunes game (see Figure 3) – a Grid 2 grid and PRI page were set up with twelve cells which played an extract of a theme tune and then the twelve answers below. Students played with each other so one student

could pick a theme tune to play and the others could guess the answer.

- Playing personal music – the students have personal music stored on their communication aids and have used this within the group and outside of the group. One student plays music from her communication aid at lunch-time which she and her friends enjoy. This is a function which is not communicative but which is providing a reason to communicate and also making the communication aid 'cool' – identified as important in Light's research with children designing communication aids [2].

DESCRIBING GAMES

Describing games are great for practising some of the social skills for communicative competence, such as tak-

ing turns, asking questions and waiting for the answer etc. For the describing activities the overall aims were:

- Linguistic aim – describing people and asking and responding to questions.
- Social aim – turn taking and independent peer interaction.
- Strategic aim – semantic clues.

Describing activities

- Guess Who? (see Figure 4) – the 'Guess Who?' grids were already set up within the Grid2 so we set up some pages to match for the PRI devices. We then used the board game and communication aids to play Guess Who. The staff accompanying the students were able to facilitate knocking the appropriate pictures down after a question had been answered. This game really encouraged good questions and listening to the answers.
- Famous Faces (see Figure 5) – this was similar to Guess Who; however, students described one of the famous people on the grid/page and the other students had to guess who it was e.g. it is a man, he travels in a telephone box – Dr Who.
- SwitchIt! Facemaker – Students were able to 'edit' their own pictures or photos of famous people.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS

Most teenagers are quite aware of telecommunications and we were keen to explore the use of these within the group and for communication aid users. The overall aims of the telecommunications theme were:

- Linguistic aim – to develop introductory conversation skills.
- Social aim – to meet peers from other places and role models; to develop

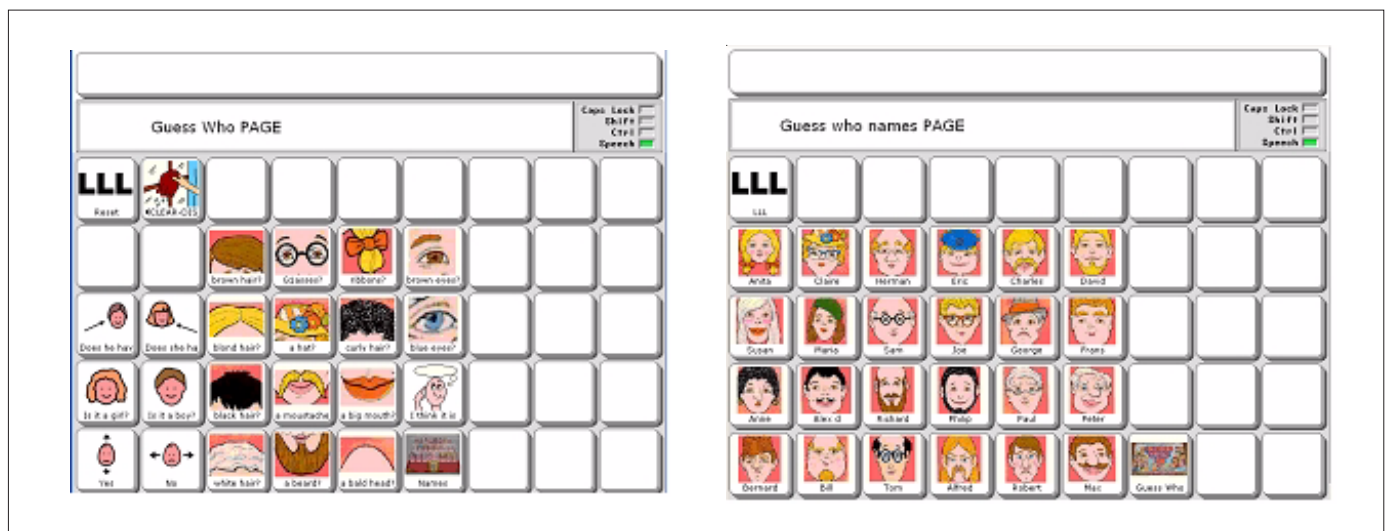
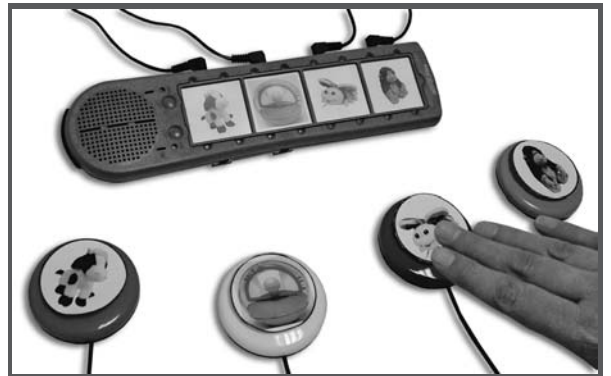


Figure 4 Guess Who PRI Pages

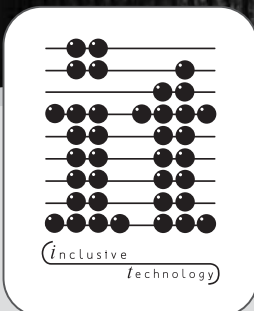
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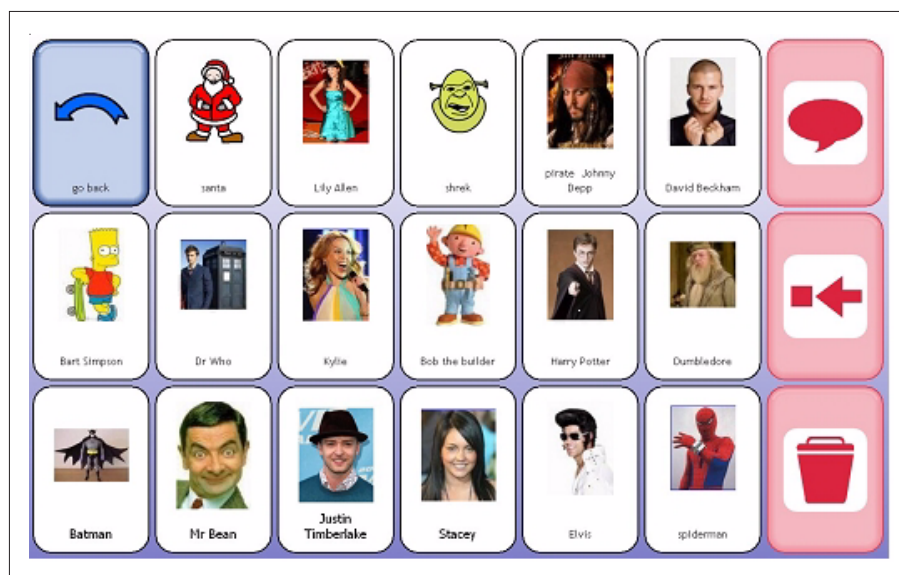


Figure 5 Famous Face Grid

communicative confidence with unfamiliar people; to practise turn-taking.

- Strategic aim – to experience different communication situations and adapt communication aid use appropriately, for example, being aware of volume and timing.

Telecommunications activities

- Skype (video conferencing) – we have been doing some work linking students who use communication aids via video conferencing. This allows the students at each end to see and hear each other and students at Greenacre have been able to speak to students in Wolverhampton, Mansfield and Doncaster. It enables students to meet students from other parts of the country without the heavy transport and organisational demands of the initial communication mornings (however it does require some organisation). Using video conferencing the students have introduced themselves to students at other schools around the country, discussed music and told jokes. More detail on the video conferencing work was presented at the CM2008 National Symposium and in the corresponding paper.
- Mobile phones – a couple of the girls have had mobile phone access set up on their communication aids. This has proved successful, particularly for Miss X. She was very excited about the prospect of being able to text and since it has been set up, the facility has given her a new level of independent communication to a wider network. She has used the function to arrange her own therapy appointments, ask her Dad to buy things when he is out and has even been told off

in class for contacting her sister when she was upset that she had split up with her boyfriend.

Although we obviously don't want students to get into trouble, this highlighted how having this access had enabled her to do something a teenager with no physical disabilities would do and also gave her the opportunity to learn the social skills of when it is appropriate to send and receive text messages etc. In terms of planning Miss X's future, this skill will be a vital part of her independent living skills for developing her social network and for practical, organisational and security aspects of her life.

SHOPPING

Discussing shopping and going shopping provides good motivation and opportunities for communication. It was also quite easy to make these activities more age appropriate by considering the shops that the students shop in, the types of things they like etc. The overall aims of the shopping activities were:

- Linguistic aims – to request items; expand vocabulary, including social phrases.
- Social aims – confidence using communication aid out and about.

Strategic aims – use of prepared phrases; getting attention; volume; positioning.

Shopping activities

- Name five items from Boots, New Look, Virgin, etc.; extra points for items no one else thought of.
- If I had £100, I would buy...
- Each student had a shopping list, role play asking where to buy items e.g. High School Musical CD, iPod, lipstick.

- Make up shopping list by cutting out items from magazines, catalogues, etc.
- Supporting student on school shopping trip.

FOOD

As with shopping, food can provide a good motivation for communication. For the food activities, the overall aims were:

- Linguistic aims – requesting items.
- Social aims – using socially appropriate language; using conversation openers and closures.
- Strategic aims – getting attention; volume; positioning.

Food activities

- School café, practising menu, ordering food – At Greenacre we are lucky to have a school café; this provides a good, onsite, opportunity for practising communication skills around food and drink. For this activity the students practised within the group first of all using the menu from the café. Role play was used to enable one of the students to act as the person ordering and another student to be the person taking the order. Having practised this within the group the students then went to the café for one of the sessions and practised in the real situation. The real environment gave opportunity for the students to practise skills such as getting attention and highlighted that more practise was needed in getting details like the volume right, in more real life environments.
- Games or role play using real menus from favourite places e.g. Pizza Hut.

OUT AND ABOUT

'Out and about' is one of the themes we have started but which we have more plans to develop. It is a more challenging theme as it requires more staff support to take the students out of school. Two overall areas have been considered: supporting AAC use in respite centres; and supported visits in the community.

Supporting AAC use in respite centres

The overall aims are:

- Linguistic aim – expressing needs/wants/feelings.
- Social aim – independent peer communication.

So far we have visited the respite centre that the girls go to, and have given the staff an introduction to the communication aids and what they are able to do. The staff are enthusiastic about using the aids and since have been able to work on developing pages with Miss Y. We are exploring the possibilities of Internet access

and Skype between the respite centre and a residential college; however, the respite centre does not have reliable Internet access at present.

Supported visits in the community

The overall aims are:

- Linguistic Aim - requesting items/help/directions.
- Social Aim - social manners; independent communication in public environment; raise awareness about use of AAC.
- Strategic Aim - appropriate volume, getting attention; positioning self; preparing pre-stored phrases and vocabulary.

We have managed one supported visit with a student and a member of staff from her respite centre to a restaurant. We encouraged the student to use her communication aid to say what she wanted to eat and to use it to ask the staff at the restaurant what she wanted. We would like to do more out and about activities as we feel that they are key for developing functional communication skills and are thinking about activities such as bowling, other restaurants, shopping, etc.

OUTCOMES

There have been a number of student outcomes identified by having the group and the age appropriate activities:

- Students choosing to play and discuss music with each other at the communication group.
- Student playing music at lunchtime and discussing with friends.
- Increased vocabulary in targeted areas, e.g. describing.
- Increased use of personalised and current vocabulary, e.g. shopping.
- Confidence to communicate in different environments.
- Evidence that non communication uses have benefitted communication, e.g. music playing.

In addition, the following outcomes have been observed for the staff attending:

- Increased confidence in supporting students in different environments using their communication aids.
- Increased confidence with operating and modifying communication aids.
- Increased confidence in aim setting for the students.
- Increased awareness of using communication aids for communication not just for learning.
- An opportunity for peer support between staff supporting students using AAC.

CONCLUSION

The communication group at Greenacre has given the opportunity for focus on communication skills and peer interaction for communication aid users on a weekly basis. Consideration of more age appropriate activities has identified some good themes and opportunities for practising functional communication and the activities have been popular with our teenage students.

There have been benefits both for students and staff and we definitely feel that communication skills have developed over the time that the group has been running.

*

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The West Midlands AAC Care Pathway: An Update

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INTRODUCTION

Access to Communication & Technology (ACT) is hosted within South Birmingham Primary Care Trust, specifically within the Rehabilitation Directorate. It is the West Midlands regional NHS centre for Electronic Assistive Technology (EAT), encompassing Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC), Environmental Control (EC) and PC Access services. ACT differs from most Communication Aid Centres in that once a referral for a formal assessment is accepted, any equipment recommended as a result of the assessment is provided through the NHS. The mission statement is "To work with patients / clients and their local teams to assess for and provide techniques and technologies which optimise the potential for communication and control." Therefore, the development of excellent links between ACT and local services is at the heart of ACT's service delivery.

In 2001-2002, the West Midlands Speech & Language Therapy managers expressed concern about the equity of local AAC services across the West Midlands, and that the model of service delivery provided by ACT was not meeting the needs of local services in an efficient manner. Whilst there was high regard for profes-

sionals and the benefits of AAC equipment provided, the 'system' itself was identified as causing problems due to too many barriers in accessing the service and insufficient local multidisciplinary working. In particular, concerns were raised regarding:

- Information – about AAC in general, but also specifically about the services provided by ACT and the flexibility of this service.
- Waiting times – from when needs are first recognised locally to when positive action (possibly referral to ACT) is taken; also the waiting time from ACT assessment to receiving AAC equipment.
- Support and Communication – available to clients from local services and ACT, particularly whether there is a local 'team', or whether the services are working independently of each other; and the availability of support from ACT on an ongoing basis.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN INTEGRATED CARE PATHWAY

Funding was obtained from the West Midlands Commissioners for a project, which was launched in January 2003, to develop a more formal structure for EAT service delivery within the West Midlands, and to

ensure higher quality of service delivery for clients (patients and their local teams). Research identified that the creation of two Integrated Care Pathways (one for AAC and one for EC) would assist with the process; this paper describes the development of the AAC Care Pathway.

"Care Pathways set out the anticipated course of care towards positive outcomes for an individual within a designated care group... Care Pathways are important because they help to reduce unnecessary variation in individual care and outcomes. They also support the development of care partnerships and, through increased transparency around service provision, empower individuals and, where appropriate, their carers, to be involved in the choices around care." (RCSLT section 6.3.1, page 195)

From February 2003 to February 2004, twelve meetings were held to develop an AAC Care Pathway for the West Midlands; these meetings were attended by a total of 18 local SLTs, members of the ACT team, and project staff; views were also sought from ACT service users. The resulting Care Pathway identifies and documents a clear process for all clients with AAC needs in the West Midlands. Its mission statement is "The AAC Care Pathway aims to achieve the delivery of high

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quality services for people with AAC needs in the West Midlands region.”

The aims of the Care Pathway are:

- To increase awareness and understanding of how an AAC Care Pathway can improve the care and service received by individuals within the West Midlands region.
- To identify and evaluate current pathways of care for people with AAC needs.
- To identify key areas for improvement within the current pathways of care.
- To clarify roles and responsibilities in multidisciplinary, inter/intra agency working.
- To improve consistency of service delivery to an individual based upon evidence and best practice.
- To define an agreed, anticipated course of action, whilst allowing for variation, based upon need.
- To provide streamlined and standardised documentation.
- To monitor service delivery against agreed standards.
- Reduce waiting times for ACT intervention for those complex clients who are referred.
- Alter ACT's services to better meet the needs and wishes of service users: clients, their carers and clinicians.

The West Midlands AAC Assessment and Implementation Documentation was created by the AAC Care Pathway working party to gather information from the local team (client, professionals, family/carers, etc.) about the client's skills/needs over time, and to describe the range of environments which the client accesses. There is an accompanying 'Guide' to help those completing the documentation to understand the intent behind the questions within the documentation, to assist with the completion of the documentation, and to ensure that other areas of work have been explored (for example, training the team regarding creating an optimal communication environment, or assessment for the size, number and layout of symbols for a low tech system).

Version 4 of the documentation was written by members of the West Midlands AAC Care Pathway Specific Interest Group (SIG) and was published in October 2008. This version was a major rewrite and incorporates more emphasis on goal setting, together with more detail about motor skills, communication and the environment which the client accesses. It is divided into three sections:



Figure 1 The West Midlands AAC Care Pathway Process Map

1. Biographical details and formation of the Multidisciplinary Team
2. Client's skills
3. Review process

The documentation also prompts the local team to gain support from a variety of sources locally or from other organisations; it can also enable the local team to make decisions about whether to refer to another service for more support (via branches A & B in Figure 1), such as ACT, other Communication Aid Centres or (in version 1) CAP (the Communication Aid Project.) The open source documentation and guide can be downloaded for use with your clients from the ACT website: www.actwmids.nhs.uk/AAC/care-pathway/aac-care-pathway-documentation

THE WEST MIDLANDS AAC CARE PATHWAY TRAINING STRATEGY

In order to support local teams to develop their skills and enable them to use the Care Pathway as a means of supporting their clients' AAC needs via the best means possible, a series of training packages were developed. These packages also aimed to increase the take-up of the Care Pathway and enhance parity of AAC skills across the West Midlands. A Speech and Language Therapist (Helen Whittle) was employed to create and develop a series of training packages and to deliver and evaluate these pilot train-

ing sessions; again, this was funded by the commissioners across the region. Helen communicated with groups and individuals across the region to identify the needs of local teams. A significant amount of time was also spent carrying out research, looking at existing training packages, and liaising with other similar centres across the UK, so that a comprehensive package could be put together that would support all aspects of the Care Pathway.

Nine one-day courses were created which run over the course of a year; the titles of these are as follows:

- An Introduction to Augmentative & Alternative Communication
- Successful AAC - the Impact of Environments and Communication Partners
- Assessing and Developing Emerging Communication
- Low tech AAC - from Single Message to Complex Communication
- Developing Switching Skills - Making It Successful
- Using Symbol Based Voice Output Communication Aids
- Text-based Communication Systems
- AAC and Acquired Communication Disorders
- Alternative Access to Computers

The courses are now in their third year; they have been run at ACT generally each course is delivered by one ACT clinician in partnership with a member of a local team for example an Occupational Therapist, Speech and Language Therapist or Teaching Assistant. Each year the courses are developed and evolve as a result of the experience of those developing but also as a result of the feedback gathered from those attending the courses.

One of the initial aims of the strategy was for the courses to be run in alternative venues by other teams across the region. This has taken up by several teams; however, due a number of factors the uptake has not been as high as expected.

Courses had a maximum number of twenty attendees; these places were generally filled for each course. The courses have been attended by a people from a variety of professional backgrounds, including Speech & Language Therapists and assistants, Education Staff, Occupational Therapists and assistants as well as family members / carers. Attendees work with clients with wide-ranging needs, in a variety of settings.

The training has been well received, and has been described as being a valuable way of developing practical and theoretical knowledge as well as an opportunity to meet other people who work with or are using AAC and to share resources and ideas.

WEST MIDLANDS AAC CARE PATHWAY SPECIFIC INTEREST GROUP (SIG)

The SIG was formed as a means of supporting and updating the AAC Care Pathway by providing a forum within which individuals from a variety of backgrounds can liaise to share information and best practice across the region and maintain up-to-date knowledge and skills. The SIG is open to anyone and has a varied membership including, Teachers, Teaching Assistants, Occupational Therapists, Speech and Language Therapists and Assistants. The SIG meets three times per year in varying locations across the region. Speakers from both within and outside of the West Midlands region are invited to present, as are representatives from companies who provide AAC systems to share new pieces of equipment and ideas.

Themes for past meetings have included:

- Case discussions
- Funding issues
- Journal reviews
- Low-tech day
- Equipment updates
- Manufacturers' presentations

In 2008, the SIG was able to provide funding for two of its members to attend the Communication Matters National Symposium. Details of past and future meetings can be found on the ACT website. The SIG is always looking for new members so contact us if you are interested in attending one of the meetings www.actwmids.nhs.uk/AAC/care-pathway/aac-sig

WHAT HAS THE AAC CARE PATHWAY ACHIEVED?

The Care Pathway has improved the skills of local teams and has increased awareness of AAC across the region. An increased number of clients' AAC needs are being met locally especially clients with less complex needs and local teams are beginning to secure annual budgets for purchasing AAC equipment to help them meet this need.

As a result of the Care Pathway being developed there are shorter waiting times for assessment and provision at ACT for complex clients and ACT has developed more flexible working patterns, e.g. a telephone helpline, consultations, training.

It has been identified that increased external links have been developed across the region for example with Communication Matters and manufacturers. The Care Pathway is recognised at a national level for example in the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) Communicating Quality 3, a journal article in the RCSLT Bulletin, and is documented on the Foundation for Assistive Technology (FAST) website.

The training packages have been created and are further developed annually. The Care Pathway document undergoes an annual rewrite and the SIG has been established and continues to be well attended.

THE FUTURE OF THE CARE PATHWAY

It is anticipated the Care Pathway will continue to develop and evolve and will be used consistently at a local level across the region as an information gathering tool, a way of assessing an individual with AAC needs and delivering the best service possible.

In partnership with local teams, the SIG and ACT wish to continue to advance the training strategy; this may include the creation of new courses and it is hoped that with support, the training packages will be delivered by local services at venues across the region.

As required, the Care Pathway documentation will be revisited annually in order

to meet the needs of clients and their local teams; this will be led by the SIG in partnership with AAC users and their local teams.

The importance of promoting the use of the Care Pathway at a national level, in line with the Bercow report has been recognised. *

Julie Atkinson, Victoria Lundie & Helen Whittle
Speech & Language Therapists

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- ACT website - www.actwmids.nhs.uk
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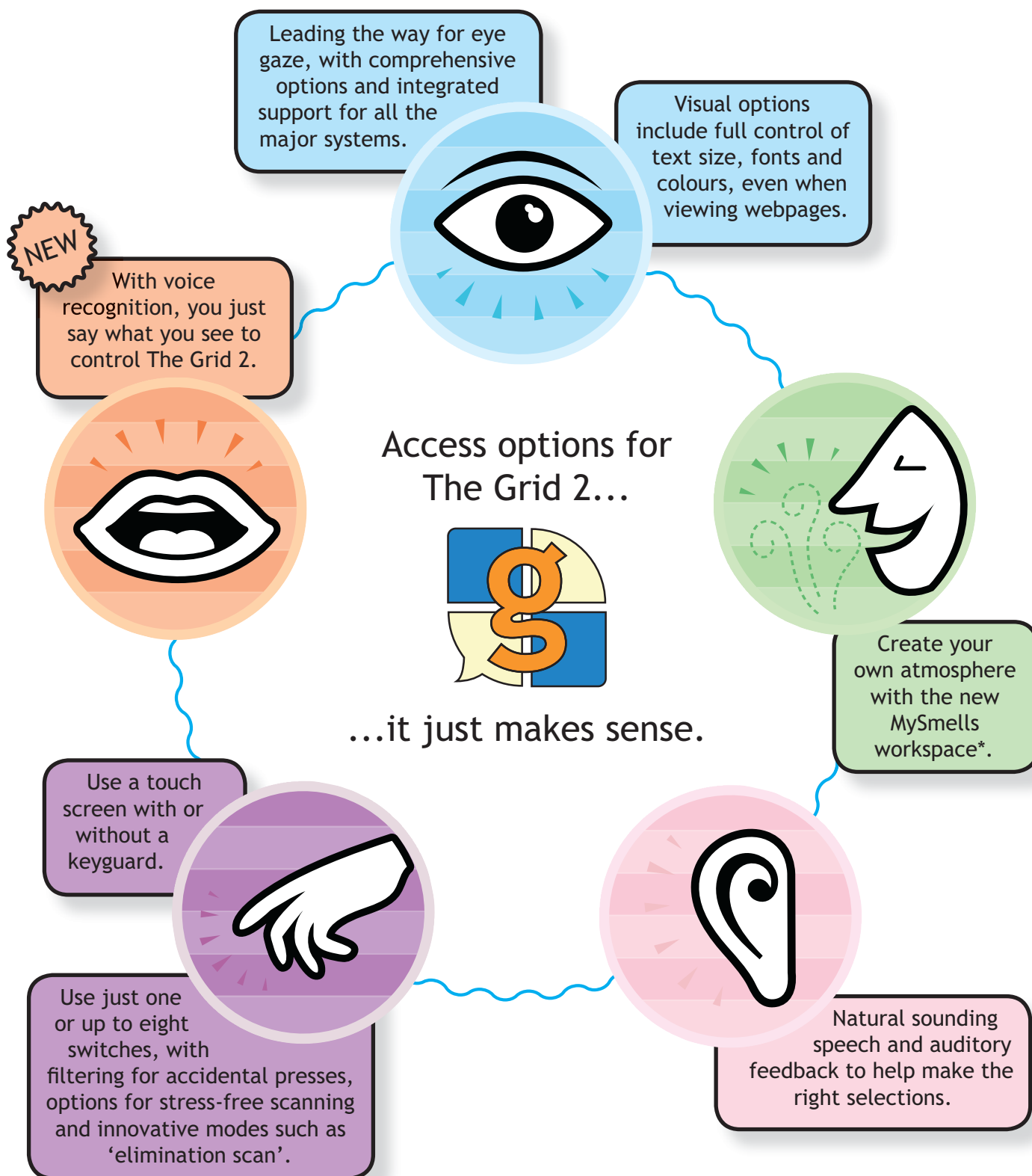
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