



COMMUNICATION MATTERS Catchpell House, Carpet Lane, Edinburgh EH6 6SP
T & F: 0845 456 8211 admin@communicationmatters.org.uk www.communicationmatters.org.uk
ISAAC (UK) | UK Chapter of the International Society for Augmentative and Alternative Communication

Communication Matters - Research Matters: An AAC Evidence Base Press Release

For immediate release

Contacts:

Katie Holmes, Research Manager Tel: 0115 8781305 email:katieholmes@communicationmatters.org.uk

David Morgan, Research Lead Tel 07860 438372 email: davidmorgan@communicationmatters.org.uk

www.communicationmatters.org.uk

Project provides insight into communication aid requirements for people with speech difficulties

A 3 year research project run by Communication Matters called “Communication Matters - Research Matters: An AAC evidence Base” (funded by the National Lottery through Big Lottery Fund) has started to deliver its research findings which will lead to a greater understanding of the need for and provision of communication aids for people with significant speech problems.

Included in the project was a systematic literature review of academic articles about the use of high tech (i.e. electronic computer based) communication aids. This part of the research was carried out by the University of Sheffield in collaboration with an honorary researcher from Barnsley Hospital and found and reviewed 133 relevant articles from 14 countries published between 2000 and 2010. The review identified the common themes reported in the articles.

An article on the systematic literature review has been published in the International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders¹ and this article looks at what the research had to say about the factors that help the successful use of this essential technology, and how organisations, professionals and carers can improve the success rate of using these.

This is the first systematic review of its kind and provides information to support service provision, valuable insight for suppliers and supporters of those who need to use communication aids, as well as identifying areas for further research.

The clear message from this review to manufacturers and suppliers of communication aids is that there are still opportunities to improve the acceptability and use of communication aids, especially by making it easier and quicker to program them and generate messages in day to day speech, and by improving the clarity of speech output, especially for families where English is not the first language.

The research indicates that manufacturers and suppliers should also be encouraged to improve both reliability and the speed of repairs as times when users are left without their speech not only leads to frustration but may lead to individuals stopping using this technology altogether.

However, it was not just manufacturers and suppliers who have opportunities to improve the way they work with people and families who rely on communication aids. There was also a message for health providers that there was a clear need to increase local specialist skills and an indication that services for adults were not as good as those for children.

A further finding was that the people surrounding communication aid users can make a vital difference in whether the introduction of the aid is successful or not. Including family members and communication partners improves success. Not surprisingly, the literature indicates the importance of people around the user needing to understand the technology itself, as well as being clear about how they should communicate with the user. But this goes both ways – those who support communication aid users need to understand that it may take time for the user to create unique messages, and also the user has to understand that the way they communicate is different from others.

Commenting on the results, Professor Pam Enderby, Professor of Community Rehabilitation at the University of Sheffield said, *“The fact that these were common results over such a wide range of time and countries indicate that there are still huge opportunities to improve the design, implementation and support of communication aids to make their use more successful and that suppliers, service providers and those who work directly with people with severe speech problems, who use a speech or communication aid, can all add to that success story.”*

Communication Matters is already taking action in this area. The charity is leading a working party which aims to establish standard outcome measures for interventions and is funding a project worker who will produce a framework and outcome measurement toolkit to inform practice and decision making.

For a lay summary (2 pages) of the article and more information on the AAC Evidence Base research project: <http://www.communicationmatters.org.uk/page/aac-evidence-base-project>

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Notes

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) is the term used to describe methods of communication which can be used to add to the more usual methods of speech and writing when these are impaired. AAC includes unaided systems such as signing and gesture, as well as aided techniques ranging from picture charts to the most sophisticated computer technology.

The Big Lottery Fund distributes half of the National Lottery good cause funding across the UK. The Fund is committed to bringing real improvements to communities and the lives of people most in need.

ⁱ Baxter, S. et al., 2011. Barriers and facilitators to use of high technology augmentative and alternative communication devices: a systematic review and qualitative synthesis. *International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders*, 2012: 47; 115-129