



Expanding AAC and AT Awareness and Use in Poland, Romania and Serbia through International Collaboration

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Many medical professionals, special educators, speech-language therapists and others who work with people who have complex communication needs (CCN) have limited knowledge about Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) and Assistive Technology (AT). This ongoing international project began at the request of ISAAC members working in special education from Poland, Romania and Serbia. Sarah Blackstone and Harvey Pressman, Central Coast Children's Foundation Inc. (CCCF) and CCCF's representative to Eastern and Central Europe, Dot Fraser, comprise the project team. Dot, a therapist from UK and a member of Communication Matters (ISAAC UK), travels to each country and works directly with local professionals to expand local knowledge and support skill development. The project's goals are to increase communication access for children and young adults with CCN in education, health care settings and society.

EDUCATION SECTOR

Goal: Provide training requested by universities, teacher training centres, schools, families and individuals who use AAC /AT

Methods: Conference presentations, lectures, workshops, therapy sessions, classroom observations, discussions.

- Establish starting points.
- Make experience culturally and economically relevant for each country.
- Base activities on existing levels of AAC and AT and needs within the country.
- Implement activities with support from both national and international expertise
- Use social media to promote ongoing interactions

Outcomes – Overcoming barriers

- Provided resources in language spoken in the country
- Improved and developed connections within each country's education sector
- Involved parents / families and individuals who use AAC in goal setting and training activities
- Extended focus beyond education to include social interaction and inclusion.
- Shared knowledge both nationally and internationally
- Established structure for future engagement

HEALTH SECTOR

Goals:

1. Provide training requested by universities, medical faculties, hospitals, schools and hospital schools
2. Provide information about communication enhancement for people with CCN and others who may be temporarily unable to speak due to recently acquired or temporary medical conditions

Methods: Conference presentations, lectures, workshops (see Education sector)

Outcomes - Overcoming Barriers

- Provided resources in language of the country
- Expanding project to include all medical, therapy and ancillary staff (as requested).
- Quotes from doctors, patients and therapists.
 - Doctor in charge. General Hospital
“Communication with patients can be very difficult for many reasons. These symbol resources are being used successfully in our hospital to support accurate medical history, diagnosis and treatment”.
 - Patient. *“Symbols help me explain my problems to the doctors and nurses”.*
 - Speech-language therapist. *“Children are frightened when they don’t know what will happen in hospital. Symbols in stories help them understand”.*
 - Therapists in oncology pediatric hospital. *“ Making and using puppets with our patients and their families helps for distraction, entertainment and education”.*

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND COMMUNICATION ACCESS

Goal: Provide information and training requested by universities, teacher training centres, schools, and centres for adults with CCN and adults who use AAC / AT

Methods: Conference presentations, lectures, workshops. Group and individual (private) discussions

Outcomes – Overcoming barriers

- Created awareness of AAC / AT for local authorities in education, health and public sectors
- Reinforced need to comply with principles of inclusive societies
- Promoted United Nations Convention on the Rights of Disabled People and relevant application in relation to inclusive communication
- Promoted understanding of Communication Bill of Rights
- Expanded AAC social vocabulary for people of all ages with complex communication needs
- Provided information on ways to be a good communication partner

OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

1. ISAAC members, working together with other groups, can cross borders and make a meaningful difference.
2. These differences are made when AAC professionals with expertise in education and health care work collaboratively with professionals and family members “on the ground”.
3. Contributing to the expansion of knowledge and skills about AAC in ways that benefit people with complex communication needs and other populations with communication vulnerabilities is a necessary route to a more inclusive society.
4. International collaborations serve as a catalyst to changing perceptions and increasing awareness of those involved in the project, as well as promotes the need for and use of relevant AAC and AT strategies and materials.

Links to international AAC and AT resources can be found in editions of Augmentative Communication World Network (ACWN) newsletters
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Resources

Central Coast Children's Foundation Inc. www.centralcoastchildrensfoundation.org

Communication Disabilities Access Canada www.cdacanada.com

Communication Matters (ISAAC- UK) www.communicationmatters.org.uk

Communication Bill of Rights (NJC) www.asha.org/NJC/bill_of_rights.htm and www.scopevic.org.au/index.php/cms/frontend/resource/id/68

Patient Provider Communication Forum www.patientprovidercommunication.org

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Disabled People www.un.org/disabilities

Widgit Software www.widgit.com

Widgit Health www.widgit-health.com