



Webwords 43

Augmentative and alternative communication

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People with complex communication needs comprise a heterogeneous group who have difficulty communicating using speech alone. They rely to some degree on augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) strategies such as gaze, facial expression, body language, gesture, signs, symbols, pictures, non-speech sounds, writing, and low-tech and high-tech (electronic) devices.

An obvious but interesting thing about the various AAC modalities is that everyone uses some or all of them regularly in everyday exchanges as natural substitutes for speech or to supplement it. In fact, in highly charged emotional situations people who do not normally have to depend on AAC are more inclined towards non-verbal communication. We nod or shake our heads empathically in answer to another's sad news, clench and shake our fists in silent rage in response to perceived injustices, write words of sympathy when conversation would be too difficult, or surreptitiously give the *digitus infamis* (infamous finger) when a fellow road-user annoys.

Human rights

The **International Society for Augmentative and Alternative Communication (ISAAC)**¹ works to improve the lives of children and adults who use AAC, and the WC3 Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI).

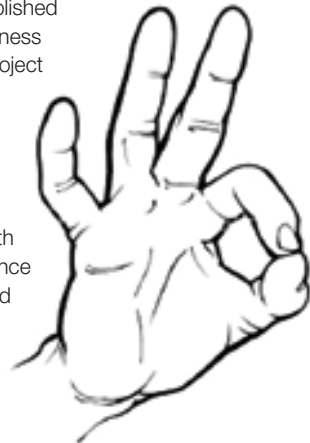
ISAAC's vision is that AAC will be recognised, valued, and used throughout the world, while its mission is to promote the best possible communication for people with complex communication needs.

In 2007, October was established as International AAC Awareness Month by ISAAC's LEAD Project Committee. Thirteen countries participated the first time it was celebrated, and events have been increasing in number and scope ever since. The month now has a Facebook presence with a remarkable photo and video gallery.

The **WC3 Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI)**² is directed by

the Internet's founder Tim Berners-Lee who said in 2002, "Just as people differ in the language, characters and cultures to which they are used, so they differ in terms of their capacities, for example, in vision, hearing, motor or cognition. The universality which we expect of the Web includes making sure that, as much as we can, we make the Web a place which people can use irrespective of disabilities."

The WAI develops perfectionistic guidelines that are widely regarded as the international standard for



web accessibility. It produces support materials to help developers to understand and implement web accessibility, and it provides resources through international collaboration. It welcomes participation from around the world from volunteers working alone and in work groups. There is much to explore in its extensive, no-frills site including the WC3 Accessibility page. The WAI principles have been embraced by the Australian Human Rights Commission – see for example its **World Wide Web Access: Disability Discrimination Act Advisory Notes**³.

Perfect

Dotted around the Internet are perfectly presented resources for clinicians who share ISAAC's vision and mission. Offerings from Canada include AAC A Way of Thinking from **Special Education Technology – British Columbia**⁴, **Communication Assistance for Youth and Adults**⁵, a **Visuals Engine**⁶ that parents can use to make visual supports for their children, and the inspirational **Kilometres for Communication**⁷ with its refreshing approach to accessibility and inclusion.

Across the border in Pennsylvania is **AAC-RERC**⁸, a rehabilitation engineering research centre for AAC technology. The collaborators are from Duke University, **InvoTek**⁹, Pennsylvania State University, the Children's Hospital Boston, the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Oregon Health & Science University, and the State University of New York at Buffalo. David McNaughton develops and maintains the abundant AAC-RERC website and owns the associated Facebook page. The website includes scholarly publications, webcasts, a newsletter archive, and features on **Early Intervention**¹⁰ and **Literacy**¹¹.

AbilityNet¹² in the UK provides a speech-enabled section on its website that uses innovative and quite entertaining Point software. This allows AAC users, their families and the people who support them to experience and compare a selection of AAC devices. It has its own Wiki in the form of a Global Assistive Technology Encyclopaedia (GATE) that anyone can help build – there is an "apply to be a writer" button on each page. The Communication section of GATE is of particular interest.

In Australia, Victoria's SCOPE website has a **communication aids and resources**¹³ section with clear explanations of many aspects of AAC, and a well-illustrated overview of non-electronic low-tech communication aids. The Queensland government's Disability Information Service has published a 20-page **Complex Communication Needs**¹⁴ brochure and a practical **Help Communicating – People with a Disability**¹⁵ page. On the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners site there is an article



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for doctors, **Patients with disabilities and complex communication needs: The GP consultation**¹⁶, by Teresa Iacono and Hilary Johnson. The **AGOSCI**¹⁷ Publications page and Publications Archive provide another rich source of information and practical resources accumulated since the group was established in 1981.

Quiet signs

The **National Relay Service (NRS)**¹⁸ plays an important role in the lives of thousands of Australians who have hearing or speech impairments. Its resources page offers videos, fact sheets, posters and brochures, and **quiet signs of love**¹⁹. *Quiet Signs of Love* is a 15-minute video that promotes Internet relay to young deaf Australians while providing insights into the world of deafness.

Depicting the beginnings of a relationship between Daniel who is hearing, and Hannah who is deaf, the film was written and directed by Yannis Nikolakopoulos who collaborated with Brett Williams on the vibetrack – a soundtrack that focuses on vibrations for deaf audiences: music designed to be felt and heard. The page also has an interview with the actress Bethany Robinson who plays Hannah.

There are many other informational and resource sites relevant to people with complex communication needs and the people who live and work with them, as exemplified by the overwhelming Wikipedia **Augmentative and alternative communication**²⁰ page. However, for its reference list alone Webwords gave it the thumbs up with a clenched hand extended and the thumb vertically erect at 90°.

References

Berners-Lee, T. (2002). *The world wide web – Past present and future: Exploring universality*. Japan Prize

Commemorative Lecture. www.w3.org/2002/04/Japan/Lecture.html

Brookes, M. (1967). *The producers*. Retrieved February 21, 2012 from www.dailyscript.com/scripts/producers.html

Links

1. www.isaac-online.org
2. www.w3.org/WAI
3. http://www.hreoc.gov.au/disability_rights/standards/www_3/www_3.html
4. <http://setbc.org>
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6. <http://connectability.ca/visuals-engine>
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