

ISAAC 2023 - WHAT'S THE LATEST IN OUR UNDERSTANDING OF AAC?

By Sebastian Caon-Cook (Speak for Yourself Speech & Language Pathology)

I had the pleasure of making it to the International Society of Augmentative and Alternative Communication Conference for 2023. The theme this year was 'Communication Beyond Borders.' What a fitting theme considering this is the first time that the International AAC community has been able to come together since the pandemic stopped us from going beyond borders at all!



New frontiers

This was the first time that ISAAC has been held in a Spanish speaking Latin American country. There was a feeling of expansion into a new world for AAC – at the moment, Mexico does not have the same level of uptake of AAC as we do in Australia. From talking to people from Mexico at the conference, it sounds like there are a few factors contributing to this.

- Public awareness of AAC in Mexico is still relatively low relative to other countries.
- Much of the literature and presentations around AAC are in English, meaning that there is a gap in the knowledge that is translated into Spanish.
- Funding for AAC equipment and services is not similar at all to what Australia has. When talking to people from Mexico about what government funding exists for AAC, their advice was that it simply did not exist.

Given that Spanish is the third largest language in the world, the uptake of AAC in Spanish speaking nations represents a massive opportunity to improve so many lives.

What updates on understanding were presented?

I was able to make it to plenty of presentations but unfortunately, there are only so many places you can be in at the one time, and there were so many valuable presentations. These are only my personal take-away's from a few ones that were particularly interesting to

me – each of these would warrant a great read on their own.



The real work: Parent, speech pathologist partnership in AAC

Australia's own Jenna O'Brien and Kylie Barsby presented on what has made a great parent-therapist relationship in supporting their young AAC user. They gave great tips on the importance of parents finding the right fit, and how to make the relationship work. Both therapists and parents may come to a service with their own baggage that may need to be worked through first. A parent may need to work through developing trust, trauma, appointment fatigue, and their own experience from previous therapeutic relationships. A therapist may be used to working in a particular way, be mindful of the potential of their judgements getting in the way, and may feel like they need to know all the answers and treat things in a particular way. A lot of the real work in the relationship is around advocacy, normalising AAC, connecting to the community, and influencing beyond the immediate environment. They spoke about the importance for young AAC users to see themselves in other people, as they may not yet have met anyone else who uses AAC to communicate.

Implementing a combined AAC and music therapy training program in Bangladesh

Another Australian presentation was by Farhin Chowdhury and Kylie Hinde. This presentation was about a combined speech-language and music therapy program run in Chittagong, Bangladesh. They showed us some fantastic outcomes from their volunteer program in the Spectra School for the Foundation for Autism Research & Education. She left us with practical tips on how supporting communication looks