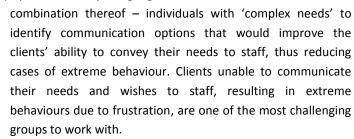# Excel Society and University of Alberta

Collaborating to Improve Communication Methods for Clients of an Adult Day Program Using an Augmentation and Alternative Communication System

In a collaborative effort between the Excel Society, a non-profit organization providing services to individuals with disabilities led by CEO, Sharon Read, and the University of Alberta's Dr. Al Cook, Professor of Rehabilitation Medicine, the two organizations developed a partnership which would improve the communication experiences of clients faced with complex needs.

Dr. Cook arranged for three speech therapy students pursuing their master's degrees to work with the Adult Day Program at the Gerard Raymond Centre (GRC), part of the Excel Society, for clients with challenges such as cognitive impairment, deafness/hearing loss, physical disability, language barriers, behavioural issues, or a combination thereof – individuals with 'complex needs' to identify communication options that would improve the clients' ability to convey their needs to staff, thus reducing cases of extreme behaviour. Clients unable to communicate their needs and wishes to staff, resulting in extreme behaviours due to frustration, are one of the most challenging groups to work with.

After observing staff/client interaction, the speech therapy students researched several communications options that would assist staff and clients and presented these findings, along with recommendations and training on application to Excel Senior Management. Topics in their discussion included a description of what their chosen method of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) systems could look like, the range of available AAC systems, how to create effective devices for individual clients and strategies for encouraging clients to use these devices. Due to the fact that staff were not adequately trained in the use of AAC systems, part of the project was to determine the impact that staff training in the use of AAC systems had on the staff's knowledge and perceptions of AAC, as well as on communication abilities of their clients in the GRC program.

Participants from the day program and their key workers were invited to participate in the project. Participant inclusion criteria were used to identify and select candidates for AAC interventions, which were representative of the population at the centre. Participants had varying levels of: (1) cognitive ability; (2) communication abilities, including the use of speech, sign language, and picture systems; and (3) behavioural abilities. In addition, the participants met the following criteria: (a) relatively consistent attendance at the day centre; and (b) active participation in activities at the day centre.

Based on these criteria, three adults with no functional speech and one adult with minimal functional speech were included in this study. One participant used some limited American Sign Language as well as photographs to communicate. Each of the participants attended the day centre Monday through Friday. The participants were characterized by varying degrees of cognitive and communicative impairments. Participants were ambulatory without significant physical impairment and were independent in some activities of daily living (ADL) such as toileting and eating, but needed assistance with other ADL such as dressing. Three of the participants spent the majority of each day with their respective key worker and rarely initiated interactions with other communication partners. One participant often displayed hand-flapping behaviour and another would bite herself when upset.

After staff training, AAC assessments were conducted with each of the key worker and participant pairs. These assessments included the key worker, the participant, and the researchers. The assessments focused on identification of symbol systems and choice making abilities. Researchers used various objects, photographs, Picture Communication Symbols (PCS), words, and phrases to assess each participant's receptive and expressive abilities and preferred communication modalities.

From these assessments, individual AAC strategies were developed for each participant and instruction was provided to each key worker on how to incorporate the strategies into the daily activities of their client. Student researchers made weekly follow-up visits to the centre to provide support and additional assistance to the key worker. One approach was Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), the use of pictures and symbols by subjects to communicate a request, need, or action. The students provided examples, sources of further information, and in-service training.

Management at the center reported that the study provided staff with another tool to support their work. Additionally, they felt that the study allowed their staff to receive training and information from outside sources, which helped the staff increase their openness to new and innovative ideas. They felt that staff motivation regarding different approaches to communication was increased as well. The study also made the staff implement new systematic approaches to communication. Management agreed that the participants' increased abilities to express themselves had positive effects on their interactions with staff. The biggest obstacle management saw was lack of time for staff to incorporate the AAC strategies into the clients' daily schedules.

The program manager took further specialized training and initiated the PECS Program at the GRC in 2004, piloting the program with two clients. Time was spent building 'communication books' for each client, learning what pictures/symbols gained a response and which combinations presented clear representation of the need or request.

As of today, several staff at the GRC have been trained in PECS and the client response has been remarkable. Each client has their own communication book and a library of pictures and symbols has been established. Some clients can put sentences together with the pictures and symbols. The students presented their results at a conference, and several staff from other facilities indicated that the approach was ,"just what they needed".

This is an example of a successful partnership with university students interested in research -- willing to respond to a gap in service delivery and a need that improved the lives of individuals.