

Freed, Karen. *Working with Augmentative Communication Users: A Training Handbook for Mental Health Practitioners*. Paper presented at the 2009 Clinical AAC Research Conference in Pittsburgh, PA.

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## **Working with Augmentative Communication Users: A Training Handbook for Mental Health Practitioners**

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### Abstract

Some individuals with disabilities are unable to speak, and require alternative means or devices to communicate; these devices are called alternative and augmentative communication (AAC). There is a need for increased understanding and knowledge in the area of providing counseling services to individuals who use alternative and/or augmentative communication. Due to the intricacies and communication dynamics, mental health practitioners who are working with AAC users need to be skilled in their ability to modify their communication style, and psychological approaches and techniques to meet the unique needs of AAC users. A training handbook will be developed to promote practitioner knowledge, skills and competence in meeting the needs of AAC users in a psychotherapeutic setting. This handbook will integrate tips and practice guidelines from various disciplines.

### Research Description

#### Statement of the Problem

People with disabilities face many difficulties in their lives. Those who are not able to verbally communicate with others and utilize an electronic device as their primary mode of communication are no exception. Many individuals who are unable to communicate verbally may use an alternative or augmentative communication device (AAC). Augmentative communication is defined by the American Speech and Hearing Association (2000) as non-verbal techniques used to “augment” a person’s oral speech, which includes natural gestures, sign language, photographs and other kinds of pictures, and spelling out words on alphabet displays, as well as “higher tech” devices such as voice output devices. VonTetzcher and Jensen (1999) note that when working with AAC users, there are issues; the issues are not with the person with the disability or with the person which whom they are communicating, but within their relationship and interactions.

When an AAC user is communicating with a speaking (communication) partner, they are not on a “level playing field.” With the AAC user, according to vonTetzcher and Jensen (1999, p. 454), “the possibility for expression is reduced, and for the speaking partner, the possibility to receive what the disabled partner (AAC user) intends to communicate is negatively influenced.” When conversing with an AAC user, it is necessary for the speaking communication partner to interpret what the AAC user intends to communicate, as well as understand the AAC user’s limited expressive communication ability, because of their mode of communication. In working with AAC users in a counseling or psychotherapeutic setting, with the mental health practitioner, (the term used to describe a psychologist, psychotherapist, counselor, or the like) being the

communication partner, it is necessary for the practitioner to take into account limited expressive communication ability. They also play a key part in the correct interpretation of what the AAC user intends to communicate. Because of the limited amount of AAC users in the nation, approximately 1% of the population, (US Census Bureau, 1996) few practitioners have basic knowledge and understanding of AAC, or experience in interacting or counseling AAC users. Moreover, because of the small percentage of AAC users and competent mental health practitioners trained or experienced as communication partners in a counseling setting, there is limited research and resources available to practitioners who are interested in further developing skills and competencies in this area. Although a set of practice guidelines have been developed by Speak Up, an agency advocating for the needs and safety of AAC users, training materials need to be developed to assist these practitioners in becoming skilled in working with AAC users in a counseling setting. The objective of this research study is to utilize the Speak Up practice guidelines (Speak Up, 2004) to develop a training handbook for mental health practitioners to learn about the intricacies of providing psychological services to AAC users and become competent practitioners in this area.

### Significance of the Problem/Clinical Implications

A training handbook for competence and practice is necessary to ensure that AAC users are receiving psychological services from competent mental health practitioners. This handbook could fill in gaps in the research on the provision of psychological services with AAC users, provide practitioners a means of increasing their proficiency and familiarity of the needs of AAC users, thus increasing the amount of competent practitioners with this area of specialization (Olkin & Pledger, 2003; Sigafoos, O'Reilly, 2004). By utilizing the practice guidelines and handbook, practitioners would be better able to meet the unique needs of AAC users, and could facilitate the "leveling of the communication field", or at least decrease the range of the communicative differences.

Therefore, AAC users who are experiencing psychological and/or emotional distress, and are seeking out counseling services, will be able to receive these services by a skilled and competent practitioner, as mandated by the American Psychological Association Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (2000, Part 2.01a), which states that "psychologists must provide services, teach and conduct research with populations and in areas only within the boundaries of their competence, based on their education, training, supervised experience, consultation, study or professional experience."

#### Purpose

The purpose of this research is to draw upon the practice guidelines for providing psychotherapy to AAC users (Speak Up, 2004; ASHA, 1997) to develop a training resource for mental health practitioners, educating them on the needs of AAC users, specific therapeutic approaches and techniques for counseling AAC users, as well as other logistical and theoretical considerations. By educating themselves in this area, practitioners will increase their proficiency, and be able to competently provide psychotherapeutic services to AAC users, in turn, developing an additional specialization to add to their clinical repertoire.

## Method

Each guideline and tip from the ASHA and Speak Up, as well as any other additional and relevant resources that may be identified, will be reviewed and integrated into a comprehensive list of practice guidelines for meeting the needs of AAC users in a counseling setting. These guidelines may be multifaceted, in that they address general as well as specific topics, with a topic of therapeutic approaches, for example, being the general guideline, and the techniques of reflecting and paraphrasing being specific skills within that topic.

Once each of these guidelines has been identified, thorough research will be conducted on each aspect of the guideline, to formulate a well-rounded synopsis of the skills and techniques required for practitioner competence in that particular competency area. This, therefore will assist practitioners in meeting standards of practice of the American Psychological Association's Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct. (2002, 2.01c), which states that "in those emerging areas in which generally recognized standards for preparatory training does not exist, psychologists will take reasonable steps to ensure the competence of their work, and protect others from harm."

Examples of skill areas will be demonstrated in the handbook via various modes of media, including photos, videos, step-by-step descriptions, and communication display samples. Since many of these topics may be vital parts of other disciplines, such as psychology, speech-language pathology and disability studies, resources and teachings will be identified and utilized, to ensure that the comprehensive guidelines and subsequent training handbook is empirically grounded and supported.

## Validity

The comprehensive guidelines will be compiled from a variety of disciplines and areas. While the guidelines are being compiled, they will be compared and contrasted with each other, and other empirical data available within the discipline, to ensure validity of the recommendations. Additionally, consultation will be occur with at least 2 psychological practitioners with experience with AAC users in a psychological setting, who can review the guidelines and tips for accuracy and reliability.

## Results/Conclusions

Please note: The above research is part of ongoing doctoral dissertation research, therefore, results and conclusions have not yet been reached, however, will be available by time of presentation.

## References

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