

Spotlight on Woodlands School

Woodlands School in Surrey was the winner of the Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) Award at the 2015 Shine a Light Awards.

Woodlands, a school for pupils with severe learning difficulties and complex needs, follows a 'total communication' approach with AAC being seen as a second language in the school and value is placed on any method of communication. The principles of 'aided language stimulation' are followed throughout the school, whereby adults continually model AAC across the whole day and parents are supported to do the same at home, with regular family support and training.

Over the past three years Woodlands have been working strategically to become a 'communication-accessible environment'. Aided language displays are placed in all areas of the school to enable staff to provide the quick modelling of predictable words associated with activities, classes have visual timetables and Makaton, a language programme that uses signs and symbols to help people to communicate, is used throughout the entire school.

All staff are trained in providing support for pupils with AAC needs, including therapists, admin and premises staff. There is a dedicated, highly-trained member of staff employed to make and support the use of the symbol books with guidance from the speech and language therapists and UK PODD (pragmatic organisation dynamic display) trainer.

The assistant head regularly attends the international ISSAC conference¹ to keep up to date with the latest information and research, and five members of staff are attending and presenting at the Communication Matters conference this September.

Woodlands works closely with other schools including the Surrey special schools' network, where they offer a number of communication workshops. The school also runs PODD training for professionals and parents each term.

Woodlands works closely with a range of other services to deliver best practice in AAC including; SLTs, occupational therapists (OTs), visual impairment (VI) and hearing impairment (HI) teachers and physiotherapists, as well as the physical and sensory support team in Surrey, who assess and provide high-tech AAC equipment for pupils.

All pupils benefit from AAC either as their primary means of receptive and expressive communication or to support understanding and extend their range of speech. Pupils start the school at the age of two and at their induction meeting time is spent assessing their AAC needs and how they currently communicate.

¹ The International Symposium on Symbolic and Algebraic Computation (ISSAC) is the premier annual conference to present and discuss new developments and original research results in all areas of symbolic mathematical computation.

A 'pragmatic profile' is completed at this time and families are introduced to aided language displays. An assessment with a multi-disciplinary team takes place to determine the best systems to put into place.

Three years ago, data showed a discrepancy between progress in receptive and expressive communication, with 65% achieving the national targets for speaking and 79% for listening. Since PODD and more AAC was introduced at the school this discrepancy has disappeared, with 95% of pupils making expected progress in speaking and 97% in listening. Progress has also been commented on by both staff and parents of pupils at the school.

Parents have commented on the difference ongoing support and AAC has made to their home life, both in terms of behaviour and in the way they are able to get to know their child's personality. Woodlands approach to AAC has given 'pupils the confidence to share and speak their ideas with anyone they want to reach out to'.

Woodlands School has been awarded the *AAC Award* for the broad range of AAC used – low and high tech, their strong partnerships with families and the robust statistical data on how they close the communication gap.