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AAC NEWSLETTER

2026 CONFERENCE RECAP

Rachel Madel, M.A. CCC-SLP presented at our Spring Annual Conference.

PAGE 6

GENEROUS DONORS

OARC is thankful for donations from private donors and grants from Foundations & Corporations.

PAGE 8

TALKER CLUBS

SLPs Building Connection, Confidence, and Communication Through AAC

PAGE 4

THE WINNIPEG FOUNDATION
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OARC was awarded multi-year funding!

THANK YOU!

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The Winnipeg Foundation is a long-time supporter of Open Access Resource Centre. Their multi-year funding allows us to hire a staff person to increase the number of trainings and get children their long-term systems more quickly.

PAGE 2 | SEE WHAT MASON IS UP TO!

vipond
St. Charles Golf Classic
supporting people with developmental disabilities

PAGE 7 | MEMORABLE DAY OF GOLF & GIVING BACK

MASON'S JOURNEY

Finding His Voice

BY MARNIE LOEWEN

MASON'S MOM: JENNA

Mason is a fun-loving, energetic kindergarten student in a Kindergarten–Grade 2 classroom. Full of humor and curiosity, Mason keeps busy with everything from jumping on the trampoline and swimming to exploring the snack cupboard. He loves Batman and Sonic, enjoys lining up his toys, and often brings them into the bath to spin and swing from ribbons. Mason likes to follow the lead of his older sister, Bria and has a family cat named Kitty. To help Mason feel more comfortable with Kitty, his mom, Jenna, created social stories using Canva and symbols from Proloquo2Go (P2Go).

Mason is autistic and uses the communication app Proloquo2Go on his iPad. The family incorporates his device into daily routines, encouraging him to use it to express his wants and ideas. Jenna has already seen how powerful this can be. “When Mason comes up to me all excited because he wants to play the running game and he presses ‘run,’ instead of just looking at me—it’s been life changing,” she shares.



Mason and Jenna will attend Camp yAAC for the second time this summer. Last year, Mason got a big kick out of the ice cream bike and eagerly requested that the volunteer ride the bike around again and again. More importantly, he built confidence by trying new activities like ziplining and canoeing. Jenna noticed that, after camp, Mason became more willing to explore new experiences in different environments.

She also learned an important AAC principle: never take the device away and allow exploration. Even if Mason presses the same button repeatedly, it is part of how he learns - and it needs to be available at all times - because the device is his voice.

GROWING AND LEARNING AT SCHOOL

Mason’s success is strongly supported by a collaborative school team. Principal Nathan first met Mason informally in spring 2025, and early connections between the school and Mason’s daycare helped ease his transition into kindergarten.

At school, Mason’s communication device reinforces the importance of expressing himself and connecting with others. One of Mason’s favorite playground games is Zombie Tag. He confidently initiates the game by approaching Principal Nathan with a playful zombie impression and heading to the starting spot. Watching Mason run, chase, and laugh alongside his peers has been a highlight for staff.

His educational assistant, Jenn, has worked closely with Mason since September 2025 and has witnessed remarkable growth. Mason uses a laminated core board on the classroom wall and connects those symbols to his iPad. During activities like coloring, he selects colors on his device and then finds the matching materials independently.

Jenn supports Mason’s communication by modeling phrases like “I like book” when reading, and encouraging him to use words like “more” and “all done.” His engagement with the device continues to increase, and so does his independence. Early in the year, Mason often ran through hallways, but now he waits for his classmates, lines up, and follows routines effectively.



CONT'D P. 3

MASON ARTICLE (CONT'D)



Socially, Mason is making meaningful connections. Classmates approach him for high fives and fist bumps, and Mason responds by stopping, and interacting. He waves goodbye, runs with peers, and finds ways to invite others into play. Jenn reflects on his growth: “Every day I see him, there is something new that he is doing—and it’s blowing all of us away.”

Nathan has noticed Mason’s growing independence in the classroom. Mason often takes initiative—closing the door, gathering materials, and following along with lessons by observing others. In physical education, Mason demonstrates a natural ability to watch and join in. Without direct instruction, he participates in games like “dead ant,” showing his willingness to try new things.

Music class is another area where Mason has shown growth. At the beginning of the year, he participated only briefly. Now, he attends the entire class, plays the xylophone on cue, and follows along with some dance moves.

THE POWER OF TEAMWORK AND COMMUNICATION

Speech-language pathologist, Brady, has worked with Mason since September 2025 and emphasizes the strength of his support team. Mason uses a school iPad configured exactly like his home device, ensuring consistency across environments. The focus this year has been on access and modeling - making AAC a consistent part of his day.

This approach has led to significant growth in Mason’s communication. He is now combining one-to two-word phrases, especially around topics he enjoys like animals and food. As Brady explains, “Mason is truly learning the power of communication. He’s realizing that the things he says and does have influence and help him with his independence.”

His AAC device has also helped build social connections. Classmates are curious and eager to learn about his “talker.” When they see Mason use it, they become excited to realize he is communicating with them, fostering inclusion and understanding.

Mason especially enjoys interacting through books, particularly those featuring animals. These shared experiences allow him to point, label, and engage in back-and-forth communication. Recess is another key time for connection, where Mason plays tag and joins group activities with peers who adapt to his communication style to ensure he feels included.

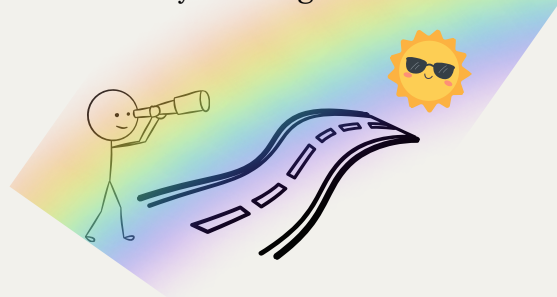
Brady is optimistic about Mason’s future, crediting the consistency and dedication of his team—both at home and at school—for his success. Everyone truly believes in Mason and want to keep him motivated and happy.



LOOKING AHEAD

Mason’s journey is a powerful example of what is possible with strong support, collaboration, and belief in a child’s abilities. With a family and school team committed to nurturing his communication and independence, Mason continues to grow in confidence, connection, and skill.

As those around him often note, Mason has a natural ability to draw people in. With that strength—and a team that champions his voice—Mason is well on his way to a bright and connected future.



LET'S TALK ABOUT TALKER CLUBS

Part 2!

More Ideas and Inspiration from SLPs Building Connection, Confidence, and Communication Through AAC

BY SAMANTHA ENNS, SLP



In our Fall newsletter, we highlighted how Speech-Language Pathologists are using Talker Clubs to bring AAC users together to connect, learn, and celebrate communication. This spring, we're continuing the conversation with Part 2 – featuring two more SLPs in Manitoba who are sharing how Talker Club looks in their settings.

While every Talker Club is a little different, the goal remains the same: to create a space where all voices are valued, modeled, and heard. We're excited to share more practical ideas, reflections, and inspiration from clinicians who are helping AAC users build confidence, connection, and communication in meaningful ways.

THE RIPPLE EFFECT OF TALKER CLUB

By: Katie Hastings Van, Speech-Language Pathologist
St. James Assiniboia School Division

How do you collaborate with teachers, EAs, or families around Talker Club goals?

I think it is very important to tune into children's interests and give them choices between play-based activities. Speaking to families helps me learn more about students' interests and what motivates them. For instance, if I know a child loves music or art, I can plan related activities and encourage communication. I also like to make sure to keep teachers informed about what we're doing in Talker Club each week so they can continue conversations with students in the classroom and reinforce our goals throughout the day. EAs are a huge part of Talker Club, as AAC modelling is so important! I am more than happy to collaborate with EAs to provide them with communication strategies to use throughout the school day, and discuss what is working or needs to be adjusted to support a student's communication abilities at school.

Have you noticed changes in how students communicate or interact since starting?

I have seen many positive changes in how students communicate since starting Talker club! Students are more willing to communicate in different ways when AAC modelling is explicitly taught during lessons or play-based activities. I've also noticed that students are more motivated to use their devices when they see peers communicating in the same way. This shared experience helps them to build confidence and a sense of belonging.

What advice would you give someone wanting to start their own group?

My advice would be to start by educating the adults in your building around Augmentative and Alternative communication (AAC). There is still a need to build awareness that communication can happen in many different ways and that no one method is "better" than another. Providing professional development opportunities to teachers, EAs, and families is a great way to create a supportive environment before beginning a Talker Club. Educating school staff about the importance of modelling AAC will create more buy-in before starting a Talker Club that requires adult support.

What's next for your Talker Club?

I'd love to continue to expand Talker Club by exploring new, meaningful themes to build vocabulary, social connections, while making topics relevant to students and their lives.

GROWING TOGETHER THROUGH TALKER CLUB

By: Lindsey Sharpe, Speech-Language Pathologist
Louis Riel School Division

How do you help students take ownership of their Talker Club or their communication?

Talker club sessions always involve student choice – whether that is choosing a core word song we will listen to, selecting a book for read aloud or choosing a hands-on toy.



Lindsey is a dedicated Camp yAAC volunteer, helping both behind the scenes and directly with campers.

Students are given the opportunity to use any mode of communication – of course their talkers but also their mouth words, gestures, signs, core boards and vocalizations. They can choose their seating (or choose to move about) during Talker Club so they feel ready to learn and communicate. Students greet each other and take the lead in playing familiar games.

What's something creative or unexpected that's worked really well in your group?

During COVID I made many 'core word' AAC Virtual Classrooms via PowerPoint, so that I could continue doing therapy with my students. These unexpectedly continue to be a HUGE hit in person! Students love to see my avatar in the virtual classroom and they are excited to use the interactive features to play Boom card activities, listen to books read aloud, do movement activities and see AAC in action during Talker Club. We get the best combination of hands-on, in person activities (real books, puppets, cause/effect toys) with the ease and attraction of technology. It also helps me keep my Talker Club resources organized and more accessible to teachers and student services teachers who can use my pre-made "rooms" when I am not running clubs, to support carryover of learned words.

How do you handle challenges like mixed motivation, device issues, or busy schedules?

I do my best to have open communication with my school teams, right from the first day of school in September, so that they can be sure to include Talker Club in their student schedules/planning. Schools can be busy places but I recognize that some of the best use of my time is to run Talker Club because it helps me work with students effectively and efficiently in a small group, while maintaining a large caseload. I can track progress towards student IEP goals by incorporating those into my Talker Club sessions, and by having school team members (EAs, classroom teachers, student services teachers) join in the Club with us. I ensure that I have hands-on activities to help with student and adult (EA) motivation to participate – songs, dancing, puppets and other toys. I have a large core board in the room that I run Talker Clubs in, and I always have my own talker with me as well, that students can use if we end up having someone with a misplaced or not charged device!

IN CLOSING

Talker Clubs continue to show us that communication grows best in spaces where connection, curiosity, and collaboration are at the centre. Whether through songs, shared routines, peer interaction, or creative AAC modelling, these groups are helping students build confidence while also supporting the adults around them to learn and grow alongside them.

As these two SLPs remind us, there's no one "right" way to run a Talker Club – just a shared commitment to making communication meaningful, accessible, and fun.

Are you running a Talker Club or thinking about starting one? We'd love to hear your ideas, successes, and creative approaches – and may feature them in a future newsletter! Reach out to mary-alex@oarc.ca to keep the conversation going.

2026 OARC CONFERENCE



Presenter, Rachel Madel, OARC Staff & Conference Committee

BY STACEY MARCOUX

We were delighted to welcome Rachel Madel as a featured presenter at the OARC Conference on March 23, 2026. Her engaging session, AAC Essentials: What Every Communication Partner Needs to Know, provided valuable insights into supporting individuals who use Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC).

Rachel is a Los Angeles-based Speech-Language Pathologist who specializes in coaching parents, educators, and support staff to foster consistent AAC use across all environments, helping AAC users reach their full communication potential. As Rachel shared, “Even if they aren't talking yet, they have something important to say. Everyone deserves a voice.” She is also the co-host of the podcast [Talking With Tech](#), which features interviews with AAC users and professionals in the field.

Throughout her presentation, Rachel emphasized a neurodiversity-affirming approach that focuses on authentic interactions and understanding the whole person. She encouraged communication partners to recognize the reasons behind behaviours and to respond with acceptance, respect, and curiosity. A particularly meaningful part of her presentation was her discussion of stimming, including the different forms it can take and its important role in self-regulation, self-expression, and connecting with the world. She reinforced that stimming is a valid and natural behaviour for many autistic individuals.

Rachel also highlighted the importance of modeling AAC throughout daily interactions, reminding participants that children who use AAC learn through seeing communication modeled by others. Her message was clear: we want to inspire communication, not require it. When we presume competence and believe in a child's ability to communicate, we create opportunities for growth and connection.

Conference attendees appreciated the practical strategies and resources Rachel shared. Many of her free downloads and all workshop handouts are available through her website, Rachel Madel Speech Therapy, providing ongoing support for families and professionals looking to strengthen communication opportunities for AAC users.

Thank you to all conference attendees and everyone on the Conference Committee, the OARC staff and Board for making this day happen!

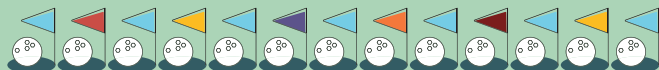


Thank you to our display vendors: Danielle Franklin from [Tobii Dynavox](#) and Dawn Drewery of [Daedalus Technologies](#). Thank you to our silent auction prize donors: Fort Garry Industries, Nature's Farm, Randall Homes, Kristina & John Ostermann, Shellie Hatch, DLR Technical Services, But Is It Art - Framing Gallery, Jenna Rae Cakes and HUB International. Thanks to all who bought tickets - over \$1,200 was raised to go towards children's communication devices.

Thank you to the Members of the St. Charles Country Club



The 51st Anniversary of the Vipond Classic, held at St. Charles Country Club on Friday, June 12th, brought together 112 golfers for a memorable day of golf and giving back. OARC staff were proud to be part of the day where we showcased communication tools, including an eye gaze system with golf-themed vocabulary and a switch-adapted water gun, giving golfers a fun, hands-on glimpse into alternative access to AAC. We are deeply grateful for the generosity of the members, which helped raise more than \$150,000 in support of Inclusion Winnipeg, with OARC proud to be one of the beneficiaries of this incredible event. These funds will allow us to provide additional communication devices to children on our waitlist. During the evening dinner, we also shared a beautiful video, created by Zoe Buisse, highlighting how profoundly these devices empower children in their everyday lives. The day was a meaningful reminder of what can be achieved when a community comes together, and we extend our heartfelt thanks to everyone who made it possible!



Welcome Jenny!



Jenny Hammond, a Speech-Language Pathologist and recent graduate of Minot State University, is filling in for Sam during her maternity leave. In her free time, Jenny enjoys spending time with friends and family, as well as indulging in her love for reading. She also has two cats, Priscilla and Casper. We are thrilled to welcome Jenny to our team.



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