WINTER 2026

OPEN ACCESS RESOURCE CENTRE

AAC NEWSLETTER

SERIES RECOMMENDATION

Check out “The Assembly” on CBC Gem.

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OARC CONFERENCE

Find out who is coming to Winnipeg to present in May 2027!

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ALTERNATIVE ACCESS

Helping more AAC learners discover new ways to communicate independently.

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PAGE 4| AAC CARNIVAL CRAZE - CAMP YAAC 2026

GIVING TUESDAY Dec 1

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Children’s Therapy Collective will match donations up to $2,000.00 from Nov. 30th to Dec. 1st! Matched or not, EVERY gift changes lives!

CHILDREN'S THERAPY COLLECTIVE

THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT!

MAAB'S JOURNEY

FINDING HER VOICE THROUGH AAC

BY MARNIE LOEWEN

If you've met Maab, you've likely noticed her smile, sense of humour, or determination long before noticing her AAC device. Her mom, Surur, describes her as cheerful, someone who loves being around people and lending a hand. Maab has autism spectrum disorder.

Surur says her daughter loves swimming, art, and colouring pictures with her sister. She also pours her heart and soul into dancing. When her teacher turns on the music at the beginning of class, Maab shows off her dance moves as her classmates clap along!

Now a grade twelve high school student, Maab has been using augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) since kindergarten. Along the way, she has shown teachers, therapists, family members, and classmates that communication is about much more than spoken words. Maab participates in both regular classes and a modified program.



FAMILY PHOTO: l to r back: Adam, Miraal, Aiham
l to r front: Surur (mom), Maab, Qahtan (dad)

AN AAC TRAILBLAZER

Maab first trialed an AAC device in kindergarten and received her own communication system in grade one while attending Beaverlodge School. She started out using the Proloquo2Go communication app. From the beginning, her elementary speech-language pathologist, Rachael, knew she was a natural communicator. "Maab was amazing and had so many ways to get her communication across," she says. Even before AAC, Maab communicated using facial expressions, vocalizations, signs, and gestures. One memorable example was a distinctive "tut" sound everyone recognized as her way of saying "no."



Once AAC entered the picture, she took to technology quickly, often surprising the adults around her. "We used to joke that someday she'd be working in our IT department," Rachael laughs. "We always had to try to be one step ahead of her and she often taught us that we weren't."

As far back as ten years ago, Maab was independently navigating multiple levels of her iPad to communicate with others. She is a wonderful example of why communication partners matter. With adults consistently modelling language and giving her time to respond, she is flourishing.

WORDS, LITERACY & INDEPENDENCE

AAC became much more than a communication tool. It became a gateway to literacy. Rachael recalls creating literacy kits built around core vocabulary and watching Maab's sight-word knowledge grow dramatically. Her love of language showed up in everyday moments, too. One day, Maab searched through an action-word folder to find the exact word she wanted: "tighten." Why? Because she wanted someone to tighten her ponytail! Her apparent literacy skills led her from the picture-based Proloquo2Go app to Proloquo4Text, where she now communicates primarily through typing.

THIS IS MY VOICE

At home, AAC is woven into daily life. Maab's mom, Surur, says her daughter has always been determined to communicate. If family members don't understand what Maab is trying to say, they encourage her to use her Talker.

Surur believes AAC has given her daughter confidence. She pictures Maab thinking, "Okay, I have this Talker. I can't use my own voice, but this is my voice. I will use it and people will hear me."

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MAAB ARTICLE (CONT'D)

According to her current speech-language pathologist, Alison, persistence is one of Maab's greatest strengths. "She might try ASL (American Sign Language) first, and if you're not understanding, then she goes to Proloquo4Text, or she'll write it down." In other words, Maab doesn't give up. Maab has also had an educational assistant since grade nine who has taught her ASL.

MORE THAN COMMUNICATION

AAC has helped Maab communicate, but it has also helped her build relationships. Rachael remembers her using AAC while playing games with classmates. She'd say things like, "I want Pop-Up Pirate with..." followed by a friend's name. She wasn't just asking to play a game; she was choosing who she wanted to spend time with.

Years after Rachael stopped working directly with her, she occasionally received surprise emails from Maab. The messages contained no words, only emojis. "I would chuckle," Rachael says. "Somehow she found my email address and sent me a message."

That desire to connect has followed Maab into high school. Her younger sister, Miraal, often comments on how many students greet Maab in the hallways. "My sister is popular," she proudly says.

At school, Maab participates in a Girls' Group that Alison started up, where students work on self-confidence, empowerment, and social skills. Alison says Maab is an enthusiastic participant "some of the things she says or asks demonstrate her sense of humour."

A LEADER AMONG AAC USERS

At Oak Park, Maab is also helping other students who use AAC. Greg, Maab's resource teacher, formed a Talker Club, where students using different communication systems come together. When Maab is participating and sees that someone can't find a word on their device, she is often ready to jump in and help. In fact, staff are teaching her to wait a little longer before helping because she's so eager to support others!

Maab carries her Talker throughout the school day and is increasingly using it independently with peers. She also loves sharing jokes programmed into her device. Greg says, "Maab has definitely shown us that communication is not limited to spoken language."Whether she's using AAC, sign language, writing, gestures, body language, or facial expressions, she finds a way to make herself understood.

LOOKING AHEAD

As graduation approaches, Maab is already building skills for the future. She helps with the school's Breakfast Bowls program, volunteers in the library, supports Harvest Manitoba, and has completed work placements at Safeway and Dollarama. Maab is described as hardworking, kind, organized, and dependable.



She's also a proud Camp yAAC alum. After attending communication camp for the first time, she came home and announced, "I'm going tomorrow!" Her excitement was contagious, inspiring her sister, Miraal, to declare that she wanted to volunteer there someday.

For the many people who have supported Maab over the years, her journey is a powerful reminder of what AAC can make possible.

AAC has helped her communicate, learn, build friendships, advocate for herself, and share her personality with the world. As Greg puts it, "she brings a lot of wonderful energy and positivity wherever she is. I can't speak enough about what that brings to the school. Just her being here makes a difference – that's for sure." And thanks to AAC, there is no doubt that Maab's voice is being heard.

Camp yAAC 2026

AAC Carnival *Craze*

BY KIMBERLEE CHURCHILL & ALEXA KOVACS

Camp yAAC returned to Camp Manitou this July with a Carnival theme, offering new and returning campers opportunities to build friendships, explore new adventures, and make lasting memories. With an additional full week, the program welcomed 59 campers across four camps—two, two-day camps and two, three-day camps.

Each day was filled with favourite camp activities, including swimming, canoeing, zip lining, outdoor games, bingo, story time, arts, and crafts. Campers also enjoyed visits from a balloon artist, a music therapist, a stilt-walking clown, and our favourite veterinarians.

What makes Camp yAAC so special is that campers, support workers, volunteers, and staff all communicate using AAC. Adults modeled AAC naturally throughout the day, without expectation. While swimming, they used laminated core boards on flutter boards and while waiting for a turn on the zip line, they used high-tech communication devices to share messages such as “I’m having fun!” Campers also used mid-tech buttons to say “I like it” or “I don’t like it” while picking up lunch. These everyday moments helped create an inclusive environment where every child had a voice and was heard.

Each camp ended with a mini carnival for campers and their families. Children moved through stations featuring fishing, face painting, and accessible water-gun activities. The ice cream bike was a highlight for children and adults alike, with a wonderful selection of cool treats.

Camp yAAC is an extraordinary experience for campers, support workers, volunteers, staff, and families. We are already looking forward to welcoming campers back next summer. Thank you to the dedicated staff, volunteers, and donors who made this year’s camps possible. We could not have done it without you.



Camp yAAC 2026 will be 2 weeks!!

July 12-16 and July 19-23. Details and Registration information will be available on our social media and website in February 2027.

We would like to thank our proud supporters of Camp yAAC: private donor, Carol J. Harvey, Lakeview Insurance, and the Cerebral Palsy Association of Manitoba. Your support helps make these incredible experiences possible.

Carol J Harvey

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SAVE THE DATE

Viscount Gort Hotel
1670 Portage Avenue
Winnipeg, MB
9am - 4pm, Tuesday, May 11, 2027

Laura Hayes is a speech-language pathologist with over 19 years of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) experience in both school and medical settings. She is from Cottleville, MO. Laura has presented across state, national, and international conferences. She has been published and supported both inpatient pediatric and educational augmentative and alternative communication research. She currently hosts a podcast for her school district, titled: "Innovative AAC Solutions."

She authored an online course on gestalt language processing and AAC found at www.meaningfulspeech.com, and she has supported thousands of AAC device users in moving towards autonomous communication.

Visit our website in mid-January 2027
for registration - www.oarc.ca

Open Access Resource Centre in-person Conference Presenting:



Laura Hayes, MS CCC-SLP

Building Foundations: Comprehensive Literacy and Written Expression for AAC Users

Find Laura here on Instagram AND on her Website!

WHO'S NEW AROUND HERE?



JAELYN

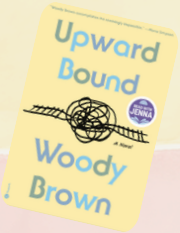
Jaelyn Pierce joined our team at OARC in July 2026, as Intake Coordinator. She is responsible for managing applications and everything that goes with it (ordering equipment, communicating with applicants, monitoring deadlines and more!). Jaelyn has quickly developed strong rapport with staff, and her work ethic and organizational skills have made her a valuable asset to our day-to-day operations. Wondering why our social media looks so good these days? That's all Jaelyn!!

FROM FRAN'S BOOKSHELF



Fran just received some recommended reading for her November birthday and can't wait to dive in with someone. Fran is an avid reader using her Tobii I12 with Communicator software and onscreen keyboards. She loves the freedom to independently navigate her audiobooks from the public library, revisiting favorite passages or fast-forwarding and rewinding as she chooses.

"Upward Bound" tells the story of an adult day program in Southern California and the rich inner lives of its participants, neurodivergent and otherwise. The author is Woody Brown and he earned a degree in English in 2022, becoming UCLA's first minimally speaking graduate!!



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FINDING THE RIGHT WAY TO COMMUNICATE

BY MARY-ALEX WILLER

Over the past year, OARC has seen a growing number of referrals for alternative access and eye gaze assessments, and our team has been excited to help more AAC learners discover new ways to communicate independently.

Occupational Therapist, Alexa Kovacs and Speech-Language Pathologist, Mary-Alex Willer have been working together to assess AAC learners and explore a variety of access methods, including direct touch, switches, eye gaze, and other alternative access options. We help to ensure that each learner is matched with the access method that best fits their abilities, interests, and communication goals.



We know that every child can learn to use augmentative and alternative communication. The question is often not *if* a child can use AAC, but how they can access it most successfully and independently. That's why we offer 10-week equipment loans following our consultation, giving learners, families, and teams the opportunity to trial systems in real-life settings before making long-term decisions. These extended trials provide valuable insight into what works best across home, school, and community environments.

Some of the most memorable moments happen when a learner discovers a new way to access their communication system. Whether it's using eye gaze to select words for the first time or independently navigating a device that once seemed out of reach, the excitement is contagious. The smiles, surprise, and pride we see from learners, families, and team members remind us why this work is so rewarding.

As demand for alternative access services continues to grow, OARC remains committed to helping every learner find the tools and access methods that unlock their voice and support meaningful participation in everyday life!



Receiving his own eye gaze system after trialing one at Open Access Resource Centre has been life changing for Arya!

We Thank TELUS Friendly Future Foundation who provided a grant for us to add more tools to our accessible library! Telus has made it possible for kids to experiment with various ways to access their speech-generating devices and find the one that suits them best!

SERIES RECOMMENDATION

by Mary-Alex Willer

The Assembly is a heartwarming CBC Gem series that brings together a panel of interviewers with diverse disabilities to ask thoughtful, unscripted questions of well-known guests. What makes the show especially meaningful is that some of the interviewers are AAC users, who communicate using speech-generating devices. The series highlights authentic communication, inclusion, and the unique perspectives of people with disabilities. Guests and interviewers connect in ways that are often surprising, funny, and deeply moving. *The Assembly* celebrates the importance of having a voice and being heard.