

Al Noor is a Centre for the Education and Rehabilitation of Children with Special Needs, which is run under the auspices of the Ministry of Social Affairs, Dubai Government. It is passionately committed to helping children with special needs from their infancy to adulthood with the aim of integrating them into society. Al Noor Training Centre opened its doors in 1981 and has been developing its training programme in keeping with the best practices and state-of-the-art technology, to ensure that the students it caters to, receive optimal training and learning experiences to enable them to lead more independent and functional lives. Al Noor's mission is to be a leading centre for children with special needs, serving Dubai's multicultural population, by increasing awareness in society and by providing professionally-driven and effective training programs, and to fulfill the needs of the child with disability from infancy to functional integration into society.

The Centre caters to students with a wide range of disabilities including autism spectrum disorders, cerebral palsy, cognitive delays and other developmental disabilities. Our students have varied levels of functioning. To meet the needs of each student's specific level and disability, the Al Noor training program is geared to be multi-disciplinary and holistic. Professionals from the Departments of Physical Therapy, Occupational Therapy, Speech and Language Therapy, Clinical Psychology and Specialist Autism services constitute multidisciplinary teams who work with each student making the program global in its approach. The program takes into consideration each child's areas of strengths and difficulties and customizes the training inputs to make it as child-specific and individualistic as possible.

Many of our students are unable to use speech for expressing their needs and wants. For children and adults for whom communication through speech is not possible, communication of even their most basic needs and wants can become very difficult and frustrating. Many of our students have the potential to communicate but have been limited by their severe physical and learning difficulties as well as a lack of motivation to communicate. In an effort to minimize the communication difficulties of our students, promote communication through modalities other than speech and improve learning efficiency and literacy acquisition of our students with complex communication challenges, the Centre has recently embarked on an endeavour to systematically introduce and implement Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) approaches and techniques.

Augmentative and Alternative Communication are the words used to describe ways of helping people who find it hard to communicate by speech or writing. The use of AAC helps them to communicate more easily and effectively. AAC strategies and techniques assist people with severe communication disabilities to participate more fully in their social roles including interpersonal interaction, learning, education, community activities, employment

and care management. AAC comprises different techniques, tools and systems. Signing and gestures do not need any equipment and are called unaided systems. Other individuals use picture charts, communication boards and special computers. These are called aided systems. Aided systems include high tech tools like electronic aids, sophisticated computers using speaking software and eye gaze technologies and light tech tools like photo albums, communication boards with pictures or letters and switches. AAC methods are used by people of all ages, with physical or learning difficulties and for a variety of purposes. Some people use AAC just to communicate. Other people use AAC to help them understand what is being said to them. Adults who have had strokes or brain injuries are also benefitted by the use of AAC devices and strategies. Any disability that makes it difficult for the person to communicate may find AAC methods helpful. For some people, AAC is just used for a short time such as after an operation. Other people use AAC all their lives.

Professionals at the Centre have been using several alternate communication strategies to develop communication skills with students who have been non-verbal. Students with expressive communication difficulties have been provided with communication boards, photo albums, visual schedules and communication charts which have pictures and photographs of people, actions and objects that they could point to, to express their needs and wants. Signs and gestural communication have been initiated with students with Autism Spectrum Disorder as alternate means of communication. We have also been working on developing the skills and behaviours which are pre-requisites to communication device usage with students who have profound and multiple learning difficulties.

ISAAC - the International Society for AAC is an organization that works to improve the quality of life of every child and adult with speech difficulties. ISAAC is an International NGO in Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. ISAAC aims to foster the development and social and occupational integration of those who cannot talk or whose communication is impaired. ISAAC members are people who use AAC, their families, therapists, teachers, doctors, researchers, people who make communication aids and institutions working with persons with disabilities.

ISAAC has more than 3600 members in 53 countries globally. Fourteen countries have groups called Chapters. ISAAC Chapters are groups of members who work together to raise awareness on AAC, empower individuals with complex communication needs and work towards a more inclusive society. By organizing conferences, workshops, events and educational programs in their regions, the ISAAC Chapters have been at the forefront of increasing worldwide awareness and links among the AAC community. At the present time the 14 ISAAC Chapters that have been established, are in Europe and North America, with none existing in the Middle East or the East Asian region.

Establishing an ISAAC-Dubai/UAE or Middle East Chapter headquartered at Al Noor would not only provide an impetus to Al Noor's continually-expanding bouquet of capacities and services but also consolidate its position as a Centre of Eminence and Excellence in the UAE. It would indeed be a feather in Al Noor's cap.

To coincide with ISAAC's International AAC Awareness Month, we at Al Noor organized a three day AAC awareness campaign on the 28th, 29th and 30th of October 2008 in Dubai. The campaign was aimed at:

- a. Creating awareness of the concept of AAC
- b. Encouraging interactions between AAC users, i.e. our students and the community
- c. Enabling participants from the community to have a hands-on "AAC communication experience"
- d. Highlighting the leading role played by Al Noor as a Centre for AAC initiation and development in the UAE

We expected that an increased awareness of AAC within the community would not only result in increased funding that would be made available for the Centre's AAC program, but would also provide greater visibility to organizations such as ours that support the use of AAC systems and the users. The campaign targeted young people in schools, colleges and public places such as malls in Dubai. Teams of Al Noor professionals and students visited educational institutions such as Zayed University, Higher Colleges of Technology, Manipal University, Apple International School, etc as well as malls such as Lamcy Plaza and Dubai Festival Centre to interact with the students and visitors. To provide a context and background of AAC and to give a broad overview of the purpose of the campaign a presentation highlighting various aspects of AAC was made in universities and schools.

The campaign involved enabling participants from the community to have a hands-on "communication experience" with our students and their communication tools. Activity stations consisting of an AAC user, i.e. our student and a communication partner from the community were set up at each venue. The interactions were based on routine contexts such as making choices of snacks or leisure activities, requesting for one's needs, chatting, introducing oneself, narrating events, etc. Giveaways such as T shirts, badges, caps were handed out to those who had "an AAC communication experience" with our students.

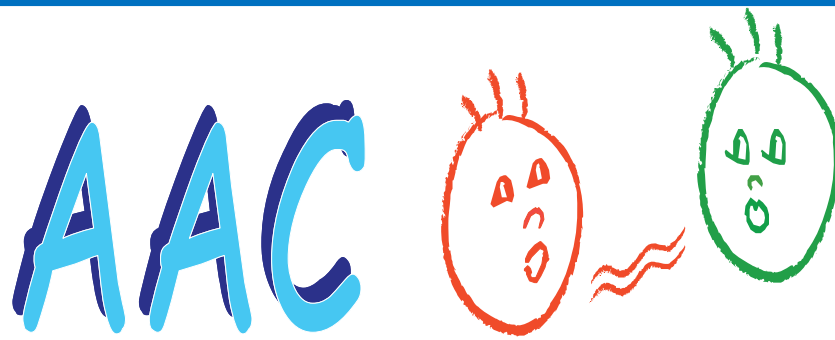
Our students interacted with the participants using a wide range of light tech and high tech communication tools and systems – such as eye gaze technology, speech generating software, switches, voice output communication aids, communication boards, picture cards, etc which were showcased during this campaign. Various light-tech communication tools such as photo albums and visual schedules were displayed at each venue to enable the

participants to gain an understanding of the entire spectrum of both light tech and high tech of AAC tools, devices and techniques that are available and being used at the Centre.

Pre-event publicity was generated through extensive feature articles and photos of Al Noor which were published in leading newspapers such as Gulf News and interviews of our Director on leading radio and TV channels of the country describing the nature of the campaign. Roll-ups pictorially showcasing our students using AAC tools along with the giveaways were the highlights of our collaterals for this campaign. From the feedback we have received at the venues and responses of the participants which have been documented in the post-event questionnaires, it is clear that the campaign was a resounding success with participants at various venues expressing extremely positive reactions. As a result of the positive response and feedback received for this awareness campaign, it is now apparent that there are pockets in city of Dubai with increased awareness towards disabilities and related issues which have to be consolidated and leveraged for funding and further benefits and advantages.

Our vision for the short-term future includes:

1. Photos and videos taken during the event will be despatched to:
 - a. Office of ISAAC, Canada
 - b. Ministry of Social Affairs, Govt of Dubai
 - c. Community Development Authority-Dubai Govt.
 - d. Magazines such as Parent Plus, Challenge, etc
2. An "Open Day" to be held at the Al Noor premises for institutions and companies which would like to visit the Centre and interact with our students.
3. Organizing similar events to increase awareness of various aspects of disability and related issues in the community, specifically targeting corporates.



communication for all



A snapshot of some of the reactions we have received during this campaign:

- "I did not realize that you are such an intelligent child"
- Al Noor is doing a great job. It was fun interacting with these kids. I hope I can meet and communicate with them in the coming years too!! Please come more often. Blessings to all!!"
- "These sessions were very informative and emotional. I will take this as a challenge in my life to help kids with special needs hereafter. Thank You!"
- "Teachers are doing a great job and I wish in future I can participate in this"
- "By this awareness campaign, I got a chance to interact with these students and I hope you do this kind of a campaign in every college, so everybody gets awareness on Al Noor campaign"
- "I think this is a great achievement and a great way to speak to children and adults. It is rare that we are able to interact well with each other and will give the children confidence later on in life."

Other reactions and feedback from the questionnaire-

1. A student at Gulf Indian High School:
"I felt that these children are also a part of our community and we should not hesitate to communicate with them".
2. A visitor at Lamcy Plaza:

"I was deeply touched. It was wonderful experience. It was a pleasure to meet Riyan".

3. A visitor at Lamcy Plaza:

"It is very useful for common people to know different kinds of alternative communication systems".

4. A student at Gulf Indian High School:

"I felt that these children are also a part of our community and we should not be afraid to talk to them"

5. A student at American College of Dubai:

"I really liked this workshop. I have always been waiting to interact with such kids and always ready to help them in any way I can. I had a very meaningful interaction."

6. Another student at American College of Dubai:

"I loved interacting with the children. They are such a joy to be around. The whole event brought me to tears and I am honoured to be a part of it".

7. Facilities Coordinator at Dubai Men's College:

"Keep up the good work. Prefer more such campaigns to create awareness"

8. A student at Dubai International Academy (DIA):

"It is interesting and surprising to know they can communicate something, we often took for granted. They are just as smart as us too!"

9. A student at DIA:

"I found it meaningful and it helped me to understand better how it feels when someone doesn't understand you. I would definitely engage in an interaction with them in the future".

10. A student at Regent International School:

"It was great being able to meet some of the students from Al Noor and to know about how they communicate."

11. A member of Apple International School staff:

"It was very meaningful because it made us understand how important communication is especially for those who cannot do it normally"

12. At Regent International School:

"It was interesting to talk with the students of Al Noor. They were confident about themselves and didn't let their disabilities get in the way".

13. At Manipal University:

"An effort should be made to make more people aware about such communicative methods to increase the acceptance of 'special persons' along with the others and exhibit their truly gifted skills".

14. At Manipal University:

“All the machines used by students are so simple and easy to use. Very impressive”

15. At Manipal University:

“It was a very interesting interaction with Manikandan and Bilal. I would love to visit Al Noor Centre and meet all their friends”.

16. At Manipal University:

“I think the Al Noor AAC Awareness campaign is a success as you are making us aware of things we didn't quite know before. For instance, the technology that Al Noor facilitates for their students which is excellent. The team is very caring and passionate about what they are doing. Keep up the good work!”

Our Motto/Credo/Philosophy-

“AAC – Communication for all”

“Not being able to speak is not the same as not having anything to say”

“Everyone *can* communicate; everyone *does* communicate”

