

The perspectives of a selected group of families and teachers from Sri Lanka on high- technology augmentative and alternative communication devices

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Individuals with severe speech and language impairment rely on alternative and augmentative communication (AAC) methods to supplement existing speech or replace speech that is not functional. These methods facilitate communication, together with functional language capacities. Sri Lanka has minimal facilities for high-tech AACs and therefore the children and families who need such methods have minimal exposure to them. However, there is potential to introduce such devices. This study explored perspectives of Sri Lankan parents and teachers of children who have the potential to use high-tech AAC devices, with the aim of identifying preferences and potential barriers and facilitators for the use of these methods amongst Sri Lankan children with communication impairment. A mixed method study was conducted during a 3-month period at the premier children's hospital in Colombo and at inclusive and special school, with 60 parents and 30 teachers as subjects. Data for the quantitative component were collected using a pre-tested interviewer-led questionnaire. Qualitative data were generated by conducting focus group discussions. Teachers were more aware of high-tech AAC than parents (teachers- n=29, 96.3% and parents n=36, 60%). Majority of participants preferred "Electronic Communication Boards" (parents- n=26, 43.3% and teachers- n=14, 46.7%). Most participants identified the benefits of high-tech AAC as a facilitator for communication and for more social acceptance. The generated challenges were; financial constraints and lack of knowledge and skills. Financial constraints were identified as primary barriers to introducing such methods to Sri Lanka. Therefore it is imperative that, prior to introduction of such approaches, the needs of families and teachers are considered.