

Press Release

April 2011

Autism Connections Europe - helping persons with autism to forge real-life friendships through Facebook

Autism Connections Europe consortium's objective is to provide young adults with autism spectrum disorder with the opportunity to enhance their communication and social skills, participate in online communities and travel to other countries (Slovenia, Italy, Great Britain and Estonia). Psychologists at Oxford Brookes University (one of the project partner) are also attempting to discover through a research whether Facebook can help people with autism develop skills for making strong friendships face-to-face.

The fourth international congress took place in Oxford on 9-12 April 2011. Over the two-day meeting, participants enjoyed a wide range of social activities, such as touristic visits, punting, crafting, etc, in which to cement their friendships.

On April 9th, a conference entitled 'Understanding the Spectrum' organized at the Oxford Brooks University was open to the project participants, the public, health professionals or anyone else with an interest in this area. The conference included talks from Dr John Lawson, Senior Lecturer in Psychology at Oxford Brookes and senior research associate at the Autism Research Centre within the University of Cambridge. He presented the Autistic Spectrum Disorders, characterised by deficits in social reciprocal interaction, as well as in verbal and non verbal communication and imagination, and the fact that persons with autism often have limited range of activities and interests. However he emphasized the extreme diversity of the persons on the spectrum.

He also introduced the research and its preliminary results. "This project is about setting up a framework where we could connect people through Facebook and support them and see them through to making real life friendships," explained Dr Lawson. "We are tracking participants' social communication skills and measuring things like feelings of wellbeing, happiness and the quality of the friendships they are building as the project unfolds." In that regard, it appears at that stage, that the project has already had some positive outcomes for participants.

Emma Sumner who is a research student from the Oxford Brookes Autism Research Group (OBARG) presented the activities of the group – which also contributes to raise awareness of Autism - and invited interested stakeholders to get involved. A representative from the Oxfordshire Autistic Society for Information and Support presented a project of the Autism Education Trust consisting of videos made by young people with autism with their personal testimonies to help teenagers that have just been diagnosed to better cope with their situation.

Simon Wallace, European Director of Autism Speaks presented a session on the importance of media. He underlined the necessity of a critical and careful assessment of their content, in order to avoid being misled by spectacular claims or oversimplified statements. The conference was interactive and participants also had the opportunity to react and ask questions.

The next international Congress will take place in Estonia in June 2011.

ACE – Autism Connections Europe – about the project

ACE project, coordinated by Center for Autism Slovenia, wishes to connect adult individuals with ASD from different European countries through online community, based on their interests. Its goal is to facilitate these individuals with making and maintaining social connections, which can be very difficult if not impossible due to their disorder. ACE project offers individuals with ASD various trainings on safe use of the internet, making friendly connections, intercultural and interlingual dialogue and others, and motivates participants to become active citizens in achieving their rights. A manual for using Facebook for persons with autism was prepared in the scope of the project and published in Slovene, English, Estonian and Romanian language. Furthermore, it encompasses a research on the possibilities of internet use, led by British Oxford Brookes University. It studies the possibilities of better social inclusion of persons with autism.

More Information

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