AAC & Your Child

Getting Started with AAC

Many children have communication challenges that affect their ability to speak and learn the basics of language.

But thanks to augmentative and alternative communication (AAC), not being able to speak doesn't mean a child is not able to communicate.

AAC includes a wide range of nonverbal communication methods, from sign language and picture boards to mobile apps and sophisticated speech-generating devices (SGDs).

This is the first in a series of guides to help parents better understand AAC and how it can help your child reach his or her communication potential.

Today's AAC:
Enabling, Empowering & Enhancing Quality of Life

The goal of AAC is to enable individuals to express their needs and wants, share thoughts and ideas, and actively engage with others at home, at school, in the workplace, and in social situations.

Thanks to technology advances, and greater AAC training for speech-language pathologists (SLPs), there are even more options and support for individuals who use AAC.

Who Uses AAC?

Any person with a disability that makes it difficult to communicate may benefit from AAC.

Some people need AAC because of a condition they were born with, such as cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, autism, or a learning disability.

Others may need AAC if they lose their ability to communicate such as a stroke or brain injury, or due to a degenerative disease such as ALS.

Some will need AAC only for a short time; others may use it throughout their lives. Some children may use AAC while continuing to work on speaking naturally.

Types of AAC

AAC includes any method of communicating other than speaking. There are many types of AAC: gestures, sign language, picture symbols, apps, and speech-generating devices (SGDs).

Some methods are better for the emerging communicator, building vocabulary and language skills; others support the needs of advanced communicator.

AAC includes both *unaided* and aided communication systems:

- Unaided systems, like sign language and gesturing, rely on the user's body to convey messages and do not require special materials or equipment. This method can be effective for children and adults who are able to use their hands and have adequate fine-motor coordination skills. However, those with whom they interact must be able to understand the signs to communicate successfully.

- Aided systems use picture boards, books, and assistive technology such as apps and electronic SGDs.

Access Options

Depending on motor control capabilities, there are several ways an individual can use aided forms of communication.

Access options include:

- Direct Selection
  Some are able to touch and select a symbol, word, or letter, while other must use their eyes, eye tracking, head tracking, or joystick and alternative mouse controls.

- Indirect Selection
  Using a switch or multiple switches to make a selection. A switch is a small device connected to a communication device (such as an SGD) that lets a person with limited movement control the screen. Switches can be placed in a variety of locations for ease of use and operated in numerous ways, including using a body part or a puff of air.

AAC access methods are personalized to meet an individual's needs and support two goals: say exactly what they want to say and saying it as fast as they can.

Major AAC Methods & Devices

Picture Exchange Communication Symbols (PECS)

PECS is an AAC strategy for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder or other developmental disabilities.

PECS begins by teaching an individual to request items by exchanging pictures with a communication partner, who then responds appropriately. As they become more comfortable with this method, individuals are taught to answer questions and to comment.

Communication Books and Boards

Collections of picture symbols are often arranged on communication boards or in books. Typically, the child will point to a picture symbol on a board or in a book to communicate or use his or her eyes and look at a certain symbol to communicate a want, need, or

thought.

SGDs

These rugged and portable electronic devices allow the user to select letters, words, and phrases, alone or in combination, with the device doing the speaking (text-to-speech).

"Dedicated" means the device is "locked down," with the user unable to access various features beyond the communication layout. "Integrated" devices allow the user full access to the device's capabilities, including: internal and external computer functions, access to the Internet, and can act as an environmental control tool (e.g. controlling a television).

SGD access options range from eye-tracking technology, infrared sensing (head tracking), joystick and alternative mouse control, touch access, and single and multiple switch control. Children with severe physical limitations can operate a lifechanging AAC device.

A major advantage of SGDs is that the device allows the individual to say and play with words. By doing this, learners can acquire new words and language. In addition, the listener is able to understand exactly what is being expressed. There is also evidence that pairing the communicated word with voice output helps facilitate spoken language.

SGDs may be funded by Medicaid, Medicare, or private insurance after certain requirements are met, including professional evaluations and recommendations.

Apps

There are a number of apps now available for mobile devices that feature vocabulary-building and text-to-speech capabilities. For some who use AAC, an app can be very effective.

Choosing a Vocabulary Program for a Device or App

Selecting the right vocabulary program or app is an important decision. You want to choose a well-organized, evidenced-based program. Vocabulary programs should be primarily based on single words

with access to some whole phrases and sentences.

Vocabulary programs should also be efficient, powerful, and flexible and give the individual the ability to be an independent communicator. Additionally, programs should contain core vocabulary, the words we use and reuse across our daily conversation.

Determining the Best AAC Solution for Your Child

The SLP is typically the most important and influential professional on your child's support team. The SLP evaluates your child's needs and abilities and identifies the most appropriate AAC solutions. He or she also plays a primary role in completing insurance funding requests for an AAC device, when applicable, and in helping your child effectively use his/her device.

Among the factors your SLP will consider in recommending an AAC system(s):

- Your child's current ability to communicate
- Your child's current ability to understand
- Your child's cognitive abilities
- Your child's physical abilities
- What vocabulary would be best for your child
- What activities or interests motivate your child

The Ultimate Goal: Learning Language

Being able to communicate and understand language is the ultimate goal of AAC. When children take single words and put those words together to create communication, they can begin to express themselves. Learning to use language will allow your child to go beyond pre-programmed words and simple requests to being able to express their thoughts, feelings, humor, and emotions. Work with your support team to keep this goal first and foremost.

Your Child's Most Important AAC Partner: You

You and your child will likely work with a support team that includes an SLP, occupational and/or physical therapist, caregivers, classroom teachers, and others. These professionals will help to recommend and implement AAC with your child.
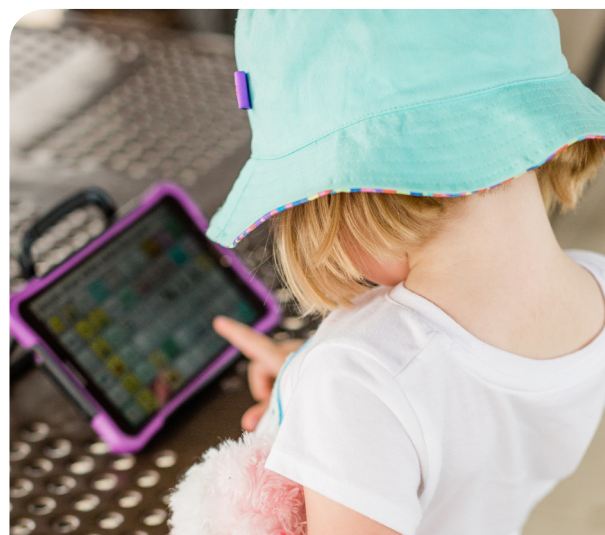
Ultimately, however, you are your child's most important and constant AAC partner. Understanding AAC and how it can help your child will better prepare you to make important decisions as a member of your child's team and give you the ability to request the tools and resources to meet your child's unique needs.

Today, millions of children and adults worldwide who cannot rely on their natural speech to communicate are using AAC to be heard. With AAC, your child CAN have a voice!

"It is imperative that the goal of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) use be the most effective interactive communication possible. Anything less represents a compromise of the individual's human potential."

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association

AAC Fiction & Facts

FICTION:	FACT:
AAC should be introduced only after giving up hope of natural speech development.	You can continue to work on natural speech development while encouraging AAC use for communication. [1]
AAC decreases the motivation to work on speech.	Often, hearing a verbal model consistently on an AAC device will encourage children's natural speech. [2]
There are language/cognitive prerequisites that need to be met first in order for AAC to be successful.	Children with severe cognitive deficits are capable of learning and benefiting from AAC. [3]
If present, verbal speech should be used exclusively.	Requiring exclusively verbal speech may underestimate a child's ability. Children using AAC have shown improvements in behavior, attention, independence, self-confidence, class participation,academic progress, and social interaction. [4]

1 Cress, Cynthia J, & Marvin, Christine A. (2003). Common Questions about AAC Services in Early Intervention. Augmentative and Alternative Communication, 19(4), 254-272.

2 Millar, D. C., Light, J. C., & Schlosser, R. W. (2006). The impact of augmentative and alternative communication intervention on the speech production of individuals with developmental disabilities: a research review. Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research, 49(2), 248-264.

Schlosser, Ralf W., & Wendt, Oliver. (2008). Effects of Augmentative and Alternative Communication Intervention on Speech Production in Children with Autism: A Systematic Review. Am J Speech Lang Pathol, 17(3), 212-230.

Binger, C., Berens, J., Kent-Walsh, J., & Taylor, S. (2008). The effects of aided AAC interventions on AAC use, speech, and symbolic gestures. Semin Speech Lang, 29(2), 101-111.

3 Dada, S., & Alant, E. (2009). The effect of aided language stimulation on vocabulary acquisition in children with little or no functional speech. Am J Speech Lang Pathol, 18(1), 50-64.

4 Abrahamsen, Romski,, & Sevcik, 1989; Van Tatenhove, 1987

Additional Resources for Parents

AAC Language Lab
aaclanguagelab.com

Educational resources and teaching aids to support language development, vocabulary acquisition, and effective AAC use.

The Center for AAC and Autism
aacandautism.com

Online resource dedicated to building awareness of the power of AAC to change the lives of children with autism and other developmental disabilities that limit communication skills.

Realize Language
realizelanguage.com

Online service that gives parents and professionals powerful ways to monitor, measure, and maximize a child's use of an AAC device.

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association
asha.org

The national professional, scientific, and credentialing association for more than 173,000 members and affiliates who are audiologists, speech-language pathologists, speech, language, and hearing scientists, audiology and speech language pathology support personnel, and students.

Explore AAC
Exploreaac.com

Learn the basics about AAC: What it is, who uses it, AAC solutions, and more. A great resource for those wishing to learn more about AAC.

Parent Resources from PRC

PRC has created a series of *AAC & Your Child* guides for parents. Visit our website at prentrom.com or contact your PRC Regional Consultant at (800)848-8008.

Visit prentrom.com for additional educational materials, to locate a PRC Consultant in your area, or to read inspiring stories of successful AAC users.

About PRC-Saltillo

PRC-Saltillo is the global leader in the development of AAC solutions, including augmentative communication devices, apps, computer access products, and other assistive technology for people with speech disorders.

Over fifty years ago, PRC-Saltillo pioneered the use of technology to bring speech and language capabilities to adults and children with disabilities. Since then, the company's products have enabled children and adults worldwide to achieve spontaneous, independent, and interactive communication regardless of their disability, literacy level, or motor skills.

In addition to powerful AAC devices, PRC-Saltillo provides teaching and implementation ideas, therapy materials, curriculum sequences, funding assistance, and training to speech-language pathologists, special educators, and the families of people who communicate with AAC.

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