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St. Paul Public Schools
Independent District #625
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Assistive Technology Newsletter

Tech Talk

Helping children learn to their full potential

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Augmentative & Alternative Communication (AAC)

What is AAC:

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) is a term used to describe communication methods used by individuals who cannot rely on their own speech some or all of the time. AAC is a form of assistive technology that attempts to compensate, temporarily or permanently, for expressive communication disorders. It can be used as a bridge to speech or as a lifelong solution. AAC is multimodal, incorporating the individual's full communication abilities, including existing speech, vocalizations, gestures, manual signs and aided communication.

AAC supports deal with the process of communication. While speech is defined as the process of producing sounds for a particular language, communication, the foundation of AAC is defined as the process of exchanging ideas, thoughts, needs and wants. No prerequisite skills are required for successful use of AAC, and AAC can be utilized at any age.

Types of AAC Systems:

AAC systems can be high tech, low tech, or no tech. In general, forms of AAC are divided into two groups, unaided and aided forms of communication.

Unaided forms of communication are often considered no tech supports and consist of nonverbal, natural communication, including gestures, motor movements, eye gaze, facial expressions and manual signs. Unaided forms of communication require adequate motor control and communication partners who can interpret the intended message.

Aided forms of communication consist of approaches requiring some form of external support, such as low tech communication displays with visual symbols (pictures, photographs, line drawings, printed words), or high tech computers, handheld devices, tablet devices with symbols, words, letters or icons that 'speak' through synthetically produced speech or recorded natural speech. These speaking systems are identified as 'speech generating devices' (SGDs). Computers, handheld devices and tablet devices can be dedicated or non-dedicated. A dedicated device is a device that can only be used as an augmentative communication device. A non-dedicated device is one that can also be used for other purposes.

AAC System Selection:

Selecting communication systems or supports is not an "either/or" decision. People communicate in a variety of ways and therefore, one support may not meet a person's needs in all situations. In order to determine the tool or collection of tools that will provide the best system of supports for students who require AAC, the student's IEP team will need to perform comprehensive, ongoing and dynamic assessment of his or her skills, needs and successes. This assessment should evaluate communication skills and needs across required tasks in routine environments and with the varied people in those environments.

To learn more about how your child might benefit from AAC, contact your child's IEP team leader.

Using AT at Home AAC Tools

Single Button Communicator



Invite your child to 'have a voice' by touching to activate a message.

Speech Generating Device



Give your child a voice to express needs, wants and ideas.

Communication Board



Provide low-tech display for child to touch to tell.



Parent Question

Will having an AAC system affect my child's speech development?

It is a common concern for parents of children who are not developing understandable verbal speech that use of an AAC system will prevent them from learning to talk. In fact, there is evidence that the use of augmentative communication typically leads to the development of useful speech if the student has the capability to produce speech. There is no evidence that a child's use of AAC slows down speech development.

The decision to use an augmentative communication system is not a sign that families or therapists are giving up on the development of vocal communication. In fact, if selected, an AAC system can serve as a bridge to verbal speech. It is a tool that helps a child build vocabulary and language comprehension skills while working simultaneously to develop verbal speech skills. Because the device provides a verbal model for the message, the child hears it spoken when selecting it and can imitate it as s/he is able. (Miller, Light, & Schlosser, 2006, Ronski & Sevcik, 2005.

Strategies for Effective AAC Use

Adults and peers:

- have high expectations for the child's communication;
- model effective use of the child's AAC system;
- create a lot of communication opportunities throughout the day;
- allow additional processing time;
- allow wait time for responses;
- ask 'wh' questions (who, what, when, where, why);
- give verbal prompts that help the child know what to say; and
- give positive feedback for communication attempts.

(Binger Kent-Walsh 2012)

Parent Question

Is a voice output device better than a low-tech picture system?

Starting with a low-tech AAC system is often a good way to get started with AAC and to adjust to a child's individual needs. A low-tech picture system may be simpler to learn for some children than a voice output device because of ease in interpretation and operation. Children with motor difficulties, may find that low tech systems are easier to access than voice output systems.

A high-tech system provides voice output, which can be easier to understand by communication partners. Voice output also provides auditory information to AAC users about their own messages, which enhances their learning of language. AAC users often start learning the meaning of unfamiliar symbols by selecting and listening to the associated spoken word.

No single system meets the needs of all children; each AAC system has its advantages and disadvantages. Whether one solution is selected or a combination of low and high-tech systems, the key to successful use is to focus on enhancing the child's functional and effective communication.

AAC Resources

- Especially for Parents: Getting Acquainted with AAC:
<https://www.prentrom.com/images/training/materials/aactraining/AACTrainingClassSlides.pdf>
- AssistiveWare - Will AAC Keep My Child From Talking:
<http://www.assistiveware.com/support/faq/chapter/82>
- Resources for Families – PLN's:
<http://praacticalaac.org/strategy/resources-for-families-pln/>
- PACER AT library:
<http://www.pacer.org/stc/library/>
- AAC Handbook:
<http://www.hawaiipublicschools.org/DOE%20Forms/Special%20Education/AACHandbook.pdf>
- Integrating Augmentative Communication into the School System:
https://msu.edu/~rbailey/more_here.html
- Augmentative and Alternative Communication: Supporting Children and Adults with Complex Communication Needs (Beukelman, Mirenda: 2013)
- Multimodal Communication:
<https://bridgeschool.org/transition/multimodal/index.php>
- SuperDuper Handout on roles:
https://www.superduperinc.com/handouts/pdf/89_AugmentativeComm.pdf
- AAC Resources Network: AAC Solutions that Support Success:
<https://aacresourcesnetwork.com/>
- Maximize Language Development in Young Children video cast:
<http://aac-lerc.psu.edu/index.php/webcasts/show/id/7>
- Simple, inexpensive devices can help in communication.
<http://www.pacer.org/parent/php/PHP-c72.pdf>