

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) Basics

What is a communication system?

A communication system includes many ways of communicating: body posture, eye gaze, gestures, sign language, vocalizations, verbal approximations, verbalizations, augmentative communication, and sometimes unwanted behaviors. Communicating in many ways is called multi-modality communication and should be encouraged to maximize language and communication skills.

What is the goal of communication?

The goal is to be able to communicate in a functional manner throughout the day. Some people can only communicate effectively using a communication system that includes an augmentative communication device. Augmentative communication devices take many forms. These devices should be thought of as just a tool and are best thought of as the means to achieving the goal of learning language and functional communication.

Will an augmentative communication device make a child stop using natural speech?

Not at all! Many studies have been done on this topic. Not one showed that children stop using natural speech when using a communication device. Research does show that children often become more verbal when using a communication device.

Which is the best augmentative communication device?

The best augmentative communication device is the one that meets the physical, cognitive and access needs of the person and has features that best suit those needs. So, for one person, a communication board might be most effective and for another individual an electronic communication device might be the most effective. Finding the right device is not enough. Good training strategies are vital.

What are augmentative communication best practices?

1. **Assess for today and tomorrow:** It is important to find a communication system that will meet the person's needs today and grow with them so functional community living at work or school can be a reality.
2. **Feature Matching:** Start with the person. What are the communication needs of the person? In what environments? During what activities? Then match those needs to the features offered in the "tools" or communication devices.
3. **Core Vocabulary:** The vocabulary selection is very important at this point. Be sure to include lots of core vocabulary words (based on the research) and a few personal vocabulary words. Core vocabulary is several hundred words that make up about 80% of daily conversation. Core words are pronouns, adjectives, prepositions and verbs and are an integral part of effective communication across settings. Very few core words are nouns. Picture symbols for core vocabulary words are often abstract. It's okay to start out with words like go, more, in, out, help, and want, even for individuals with intellectual disabilities. The other 20% of what we say is made up of fringe vocabulary or words that are personalized to the individual. You will also see that core vocabulary words combine very nicely with whatever fringe vocabulary (nouns) you may choose. It's usually easy to find pictures to represent the fringe words.
4. **Muscle Memory:** Facilitate progress and speed by relying on muscle memory. Start the page layout with the same number of message spaces that you plan to end with. You may want to hide all but a few pictures to start. Fill in the blanks or "unhide" message symbols as

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progress occurs. This allows the person to grow with the device while benefitting from their motor memory. This means that the messages stay in the same location and do not change position (message position changes happen when changing from a 2 to a 4, then 8, then 16, then 32, etc. message layout). Muscle memory is what lets us type so quickly without looking at the keys when using a regular keyboard.

5. **Modeling:** Model how to use the device. Just like we model speech for people to be verbal, we need to model the use of communication devices for the person to communicate with communication devices. The communication partner pushes corresponding messages as they speak. So if the adult says “Ok, I’ll pick you up,” they are telling the person by activating the “I” and “up” message on the communication device.
6. **Expectations:** Give communication expectations. Instead of saying “push the button,” try saying “tell me” and gesture towards the messages. This lets the person know that you want him or her to communicate with you, not just flip on a switch.
7. **Communication Partners:** Let the person explore their new device. Respond to what the person communicates with their device just as if they communicated verbally. If the person makes a choice, offer vocabulary to keep the conversation going. Offer positive reinforcement for appropriate behavior such as using words instead of unwanted behavior, keeping their device with them, and using the device to participate in daily activities.
8. **Learning AAC:** The person will learn language and their AAC system based on the consequences of using words. Don’t have the person match pictures to objects or pictures to pictures. Don’t test the individual by asking them to locate or identify messages. Start by engaging the person in conversation.

Communication Bill of Rights

All people with a disability of any extent or severity have a basic right to affect, through communication, the conditions of their existence. All people have the following specific communication rights in their daily interactions:

- The right to interact socially, maintain social closeness, and build relationships
- The right to request desired objects, actions, events, and people
- The right to refuse or reject undesired objects, actions, events, or choices
- The right to express personal preferences and feelings
- The right to make choices from meaningful alternatives
- The right to make comments and share opinions
- The right to ask for and give information, including information about changes in routine and environment
- The right to be informed about people and events in one’s life
- The right to access interventions and supports that improve communication
- The right to have communication acts acknowledged and responded to even when the desired outcome cannot be realized
- The right to have access to functioning AAC and other AT services and devices at all times
- The right to access environmental contexts, interactions, and opportunities that promote participation as full communication partners with other people, including peers
- The right to be treated with dignity and addressed with respect and courtesy
- The right to be addressed directly and not be spoken for or talked about in the third person while present
- The right to have clear, meaningful, and culturally and linguistically appropriate communications

For more information, go to the NJC website at www.asha.org/njc

Brady, N. C., Bruce, S., Goldman, A., Erickson, K., Mineo, B., Ogletree, B. T., Paul, D., Romski, M., Sevcik, R., Siegel, E., Schoonover, J., Snell, M., Sylvester, L., & Wilkinson, K. (2016). Communication services and supports for individuals with severe disabilities: Guidance for assessment and intervention. *American Journal on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, 121*(2), 121-138.