Introduction to AAC: Building the Core of Communication

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What can struggling communication look like?

Confrontation, tantrums, 'behavioral difficulties'

Not trying to communicate

Learned helplessness: "Everything gets done for me"

Use of non-verbal communication strategies (pointing, pulling) to communicate

Lack of experience in communicating

Frustration

No control over their decisions

Self Harm?

Loss of independence – reliance on others

Why is it hard for *all* children to communicate?

- Learning new words.
- Remembering vocabulary.
- Putting longer sentences together.
- Understanding new 'concepts' (colors, sizes, shapes, verbs etc.).
- Using language socially: for example making requests and sharing information.
- Using language across different settings.

What can we do to support students with communication difficulties?

We introduce AAC!

# Augmentative or Alternative Communication (AAC)

Augmentative:

Supports or enhances the communication a person already has.

This could include a child who has spoken language, but is very hard to understand.

Alternative:

When spoken communication is not effective or available a different type of communication method is used

AAC can be **temporary** or **permanent** and is crucial to language development!
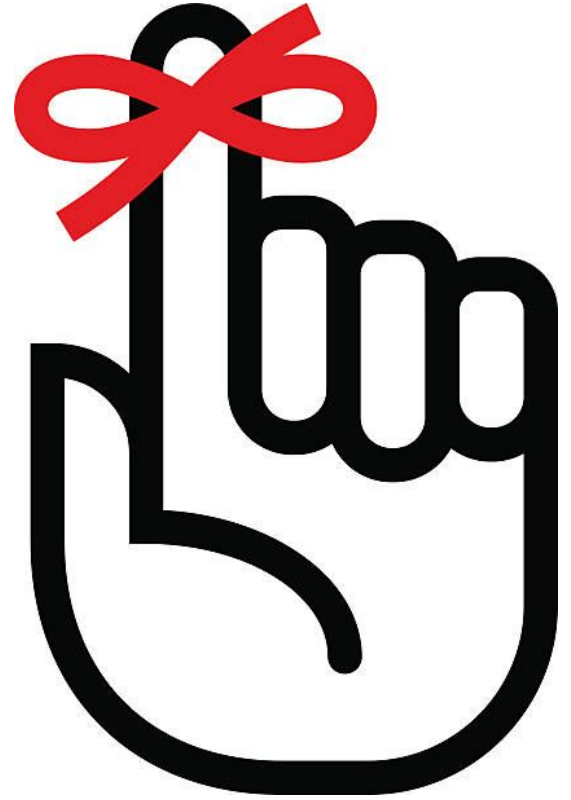
AAC you may see: Light Tech

- Core Communication Boards
- Picture Exchange Binders
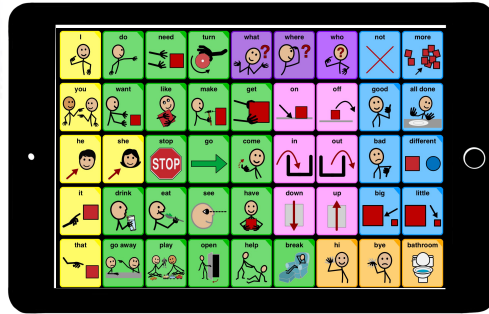- Signs (ASL)
- Eye gaze boards

AAC you may see: Mid-Tech

- Go Talks
- Switches

AAC you may see: High Tech

- iPad communication devices (Proloquo, LAMP, and others)

- Dedicated Communication system like Accent or TouchChat

- Eye gaze system

But I heard...

What are some concerns you may have about your child using AAC?

What are some things you may have heard about AAC that make you wonder if it is the right tool?

Myth #1: AAC is a last resort in speech-language intervention

- AAC is beneficial in the early stages of communication development

- We should not wait until a child is older to use AAC

- AAC should be incorporated into therapy when the child's earliest communication behaviors are difficult to interpret

- If we wait to use AAC, they could be at risk for further developmental delays in communication.
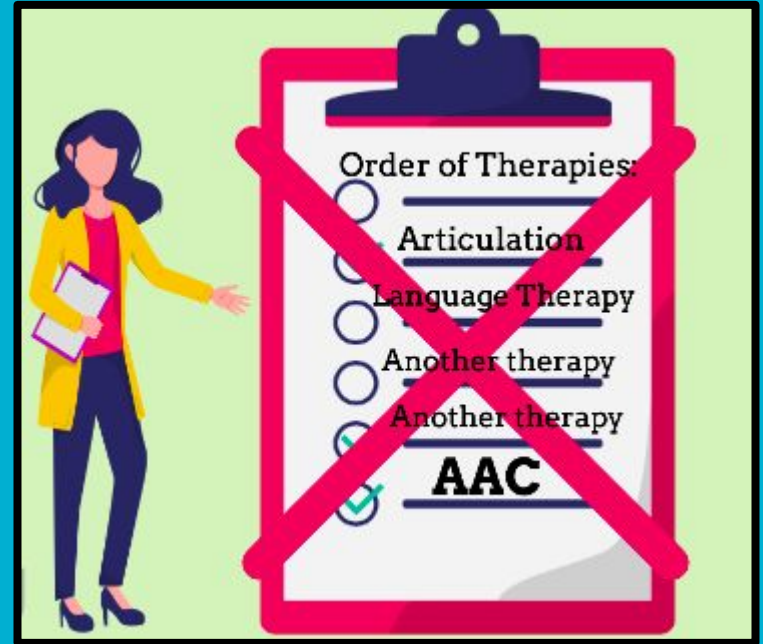
Myth #2: AAC stops or hinders speech development

- **This is NOT true!**

- Research shows that AAC improves speech development

- In some cases, AAC reduces pressure on the individual and in turn, facilitates speech production

- Can also allow people to bypass the cognitive and motor demands of speech in order for them to focus on communication
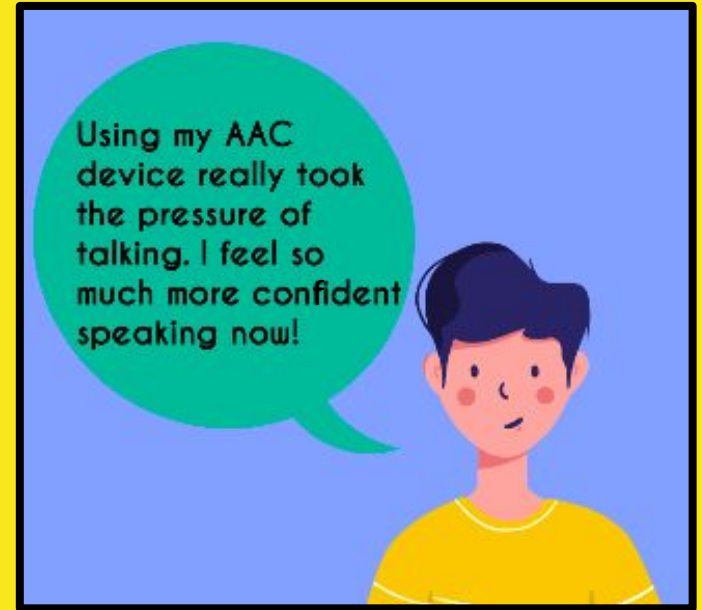
Myth #3: You have to have behavior under control before using AAC

- Students most likely exhibit behaviors due to an inability to communicate effectively with others.

- Schools and families hesitate to use high tech systems in fear that they may be destroyed.

- Behaviors are often a student's most reliable form of communication.

"I want it now!!"

Myth #4: People have to be a certain age to benefit from AAC

- Both children and adults can benefit from AAC

- AAC can effectively be used for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers

  - In a study by Ganz et. al, researchers found moderate effectiveness of AAC for all ages throughout school years

AAC is for ALL ages

Myth #5: People have to be physically able to touch a device to benefit from AAC/A person can be too impaired to benefit from AAC
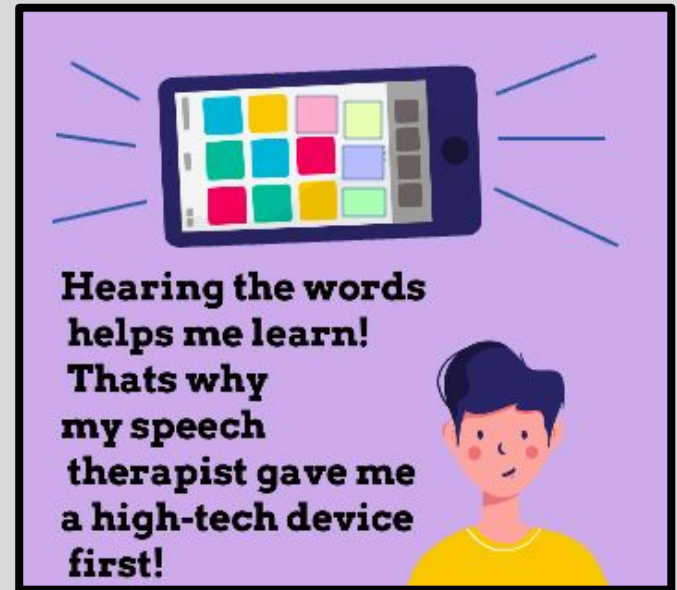
This is not true!
- There are several different ways to access a device
    - Eye/head tracking devices
    - Switches
    - Partner assisted scanning

- Several different kinds of eye tracking devices

- There are also low-tech eye gaze systems that people can use with the help of a communication partner

My disability doesn't stop me from talking! I activate my device with my eyes!

Myth #6: It is necessary to use light tech AAC tools before using high tech AAC.

NO!
- We now know that there are NO PREREQUISITE skills needed to use AAC.

- Some people need a sound generating devices (SGD) to effectively use AAC
  - They need the sound to connect the meaning to the symbol.

- Several studies have found that people who use SGDs have more opportunities to speak, they take more turns, and they convey longer messages and early exposure increase developmental outcomes.

Hearing the words helps me learn! Thats why my speech therapist gave me a high-tech device first!

Myth #7: People who can express their basic needs do not need AAC

This is NOT true!

- Everyone has a communication bill of rights. Everyone has the right to communicate in order to achieve communicative competence

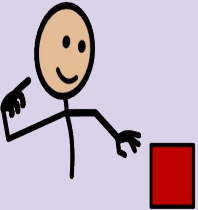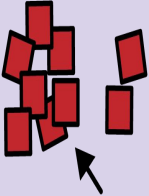- *AAC can act as supplementation for the person's communication*

Sometimes I use a communication device and other times I speak. Using both makes me feel more comfortable!
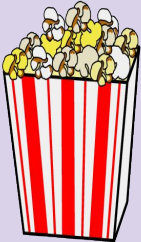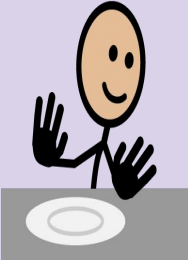
Myth #8: People with severe communication impairments cannot learn literacy skills with AAC

NO! This is NOT true!
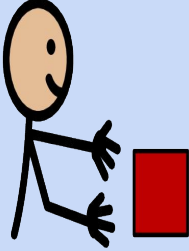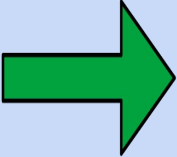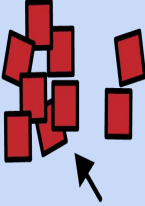
- People with severe communication impairments are still able to learn literacy skills so that they can read and write

- Explicitly teaching literacy skills can help individuals with communication impairment make significant gains in letter-sound correspondence, phonological awareness skills, decoding single words, reading sight words, and generalizing skills in shared reading activities.

Reading is for AAC users too! Just because we talk differently doesn't mean we can't read!

| I want | More | Pretzel | Cookie |
| Popcorn | Juice | Bathroom | All Done |

How many things can you say with these words?

Now, how many things can you say with *these* words?

Robust Communication System

A communication system is robust (or comprehensive) if it has four key elements:

1. allow the user to communicate a range of functions of communication
2. provide access to core vocabulary
3. provide access to fringe vocabulary
4. provide access to the alphabet

Range of Communication Functions

Everyone communicates for a range of different purposes. When looking at options for a robust AAC system, consider whether the system allows the user to:

- Request assistance (help), recurrence (more), and cessation (finished, stop)

- Share an opinion

- Complain and protest

- Request activities, actions, and places

- Ask and answer questions

- Engage in social routines, such as using greetings and manners

If it is not possible to communicate these functions of then it may not be a robust communication system.

What is Core Vocabulary?

- Core vocabulary is a small set of simple words, in any language, that are used frequently and across contexts (Cross, Baker, Klotz & Badman, 1997).

- Of all the words we use, there are about 350 words that account for approximately 80% of words we speak regularly. (i.e. *go, I, big, see, more*)

- Most sight word lists used in schools are made up of core vocabulary words, such as those found on the Dolch word lists.

- Personal core – these are words that are frequently used by specific child, that may not be core words that others use. (What would be your personal core words?)

- Core vocabulary words help us communicate for a variety of purposes!

What is Fringe Vocabulary?

- Fringe vocabulary is a set of words (mostly nouns) that are situation, context specific. Examples of fringe vocabulary could be strawberry, hydrogen, respiration, Pluto, Paris, etc)

- Fringe vocabulary includes the personalised words (e.g., names of friends and family members) and words that fit into categories (e.g., vehicles, animals, food and drink, colors).

- 20% of what we say comes from a bank of thousands of FRINGE words

- The importance of these words changes from person to person and give the speaker the ability to communicate about specific topics in specific environments

- Fringe vocabulary is necessary to a robust vocabulary system!

Alphabet

- A robust communication system provides users with access to the alphabet.

- The alphabet should be accessible even for students who cannot read or write (yet!).

- Students using AAC need to be able to explore the alphabet, in the same way that neurotypical students scribble with a pencil before they learn to write.

Why learning Core Vocabulary (CV) is so important!

Core vs. Subject Related Fringe

★ students will use CV words again and again

★ Fringe vocabulary is used during the unit then not used again until next year (or ever)

Gives Team a Vision and Focus

★ not constantly programming more vocabulary for one activity, event or subject

★ promotes descriptive language

Words used across a Lifetime

★ Can use CV across a broad number of events or activities

★ CV words are needed throughout the student's entire life

Promotes Generative Language

★ not limited to scripts or pre programmed phrases

★ not limited to requesting nouns

Final Thoughts

AAC is a tool and not a magic wand! As with anything, growth and success take effort, patience and determination. Progress will be slow and steady, but it will occur!

We need to "lay a solid foundation and that takes time. We all love to get immediate results, but the more realistic scenario is slow and steady gains." -
Blog Post, PrAACtical AAC website

HAVING A COMMUNICATION DEVICE DOESN'T MAKE YOU AN EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATOR ANY MORE THAN HAVING A PIANO MAKES YOU A MUSICIAN. (BEUKELMAN, 1991)

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Even when it comes to AAC we must remember communication is about *people* not devices.
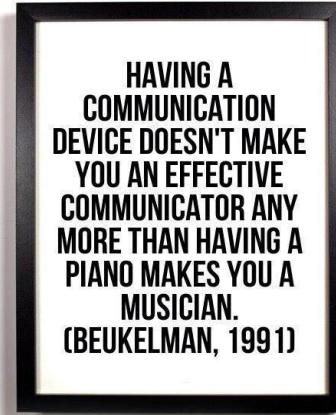
Questions???

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