



Supporting AAC in the Classroom

What is AAC?

AAC refers to **Augmentative and Alternative Communication** which encompasses all forms of communication, either in addition to or alternative to spoken language. It includes both aided and unaided communication. Children and adults are considered for an AAC system when their verbal language doesn't meet their communication needs. For some children this means that they haven't developed speech yet, their speech is very hard to understand or they do not have enough speech to participate in the environments they find themselves in everyday. The term AAC refers to all alternative communication systems including paper based boards, low (e.g. *PODD*) and high technology systems (e.g. *iPads*, *Accent*, *Liberator Rugged*).

Why use AAC?

In order to effectively participate in classroom activities, students with complex communication needs must have a way to:

- Express their thoughts
- Share ideas
- Make their needs and wants known
- Communicate what they know, and what they think they know
- Ask and answer questions
- Provide information
- Discuss problems and solutions
- Agree and disagree on topics
- Express likes and dislikes
- Make choices
- Interact with peers - make friends



"One of my students started using a communication device at the beginning of the year. To be honest, I was quite nervous when I first heard that he would be bringing a device to school..."

Within a few months though he was a different boy - I noticed a real change! Not only have things improved academically, but he is a lot less frustrated, and his confidence is growing day by day.

Even though group activities are a challenge for him, he is participating so much more now. I'm really glad we stuck with it!

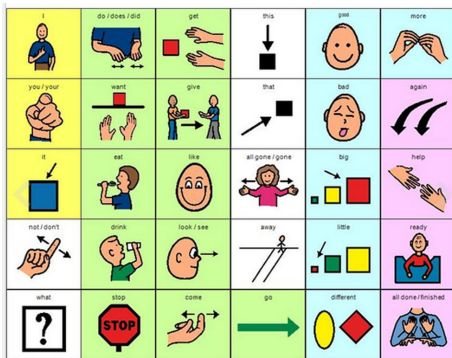
His key therapist helped us to understand more about his device and how to use AAC in our classroom.

I feel like his personality is really starting to shine through!

Teacher, Gr. 4



thank you



What are the different types of AAC?

- Signs and Gestures (Key Word Sign; Australian Sign Language)
- Picture Communication Exchange System (PECS)
- Picture, symbol, alphabet and Word Boards
- Speech Generating Devices (high tech AAC devices)

High tech augmentative and alternative communication includes the more sophisticated devices that make heavy use of technology. These are often computer or tablet-like devices where you push a button on a screen and it will either speak a message or open up more choices.

AAC Apps

AAC apps are available to download. If you have a tablet device or smart phone like an iPad or iPhone. The app turns your phone or tablet into a high tech AAC device.

Unaided communication relies on the user/communicator using their own body to convey their message (e.g. sign language)

Aided communication utilises a tool or piece of equipment in addition to the user's own body.



The Benefits of AAC:

It is important that students with complex communication needs have an opportunity to communicate and to participate in a wide range of activities at school just like any other students do.

AAC has been found to facilitate the development of verbal communication and therefore it may be a short term option for some students to support (**augment**) communication while their verbal skills develop and improve.

For other students speech may never develop to the extent required to fulfil their communication needs effectively, and for these students AAC provides an **alternative** way of getting their message across which they can use throughout their life.

We must remember that speech is only one way of communicating. With the right system in place, students who have limited or no verbal ability can still be effective communicators.

AAC:

- Provides a means to communicate with others
- Supports the development of social skills
- Supports the development of verbal skills
- Supports the understanding and use of core language
- Supports the development of language comprehension
- Supports participation in the classroom setting



Talking with a student who uses AAC for the first time can seem quite daunting. You may be thinking "Will I understand them?", "Will they understand me?", "What if they need help and I don't know what to do?", "It looks complicated, what if I don't pick it up?" "I'm worried about how long it's going to take". These are all common concerns.

As with all new ways of communicating, practice makes perfect! The more you engage with the student who uses AAC, the easier it becomes! The benefits by far outweigh any of the challenges you might be anticipating. AAC may look different, but participating in life through communication is an immense payoff for the student using it!

No Tech:

No equipment is involved in this communication system. Also known as 'unaided communication'

Low / Light Tech:

These systems do not need a battery or power supply to operate them. This sort of communication system can be as simple as a pen and paper, alphabet board or communication book

High Tech:

These communication systems require a power supply and often have voice or text output functions. These may be static or dynamic display systems.

Static Display:

Contains language that is organised into a grid format, often with recorded speech messages. There may be a number of levels of displays which the user can change to e.g. GoTalk20

Dynamic Display:

Has page links between language which enables the user to navigate between 'branches' of language to find their desired word (e.g. LR7, Accent)



Which system is best?

Unfortunately there is no one perfect AAC system for everyone. Each AAC system has positive and negatives and these are carefully considered when recommending an AAC system for an individual. Low technology communication systems such as choice boards, aided language displays or core word boards and Pragmatically Organised Dynamic Display (PODD) books can be a good starting point for an individual with challenges communicating verbally. A Speech Pathologist or the child's therapy provider can then carry out a comprehensive assessment to determine the most appropriate AAC system.

Can I choose one AAC system for everyone to use?

Choosing one device to suit everyone in a classroom is not recommended as it doesn't take into account the individual needs of each child. Having universal access to low tech systems such as core boards provides equal access to communication supports without using a high tech system that may not be best suited to that child. Assessment and prescription of a communication system is an in depth and individualised process completed by the child's therapy team and evidence of this process is needed for funding applications.






Why so many different AAC Systems?

There are a large number of high tech AAC systems that are available for purchase. Children who receive an AAC device from a therapy provider undergo an assessment to find the device that is best suited to their individual needs. This assessment process may involve a combination of meetings with the child, family and school; observations and direct trials of a system. The child and family's needs are matched to the features of the available system to determine the system that is the best fit - This is known as **feature matching**.

For example, a child who has a co-occurring diagnosis of Epilepsy may require a more durable and robust AAC system in case it gets dropped during a seizure. A child who has visual processing difficulties may require an AAC system that has the capability to visually contrast buttons. A feature matching tool such as the example below is often used to compare the desired features with the AAC systems available.



Feature Matching Tool:

FEATURE → SYSTEM ↓		Symbol Set	Supports Sentence Building	Light Weight	Access to Core Vocabulary	Robust	Easy to Program	Technical Support Available
Accent 								
Liberator Rugged 7 								
I-Pad with Proloquo2Go 								
Supertalker 								
PODD Book 								

Why is it important to have an individualised system?

AAC systems are more likely to be used in the long term when they are individualised to the needs of the student. Individualising the system means that it will have the features and language system to encourage communication and enable the student to communicate in the most effective means possible. Individualising a communication system supports long term use by:

- Fostering a sense of ownership – “this is my voice”
- Meeting the communication needs of the student and the people that support him/her
- Increasing motivation to use the system through access to highly motivating vocabulary
- Providing access to relevant, individualised vocabulary (e.g. Australian vocab, names)
- Increase likelihood of successful communication through rewarding interactions and communicative consequences
- Supports interactions with family members and friends through use of common vocabulary
- Allowing for the system to be customised to match the student’s current and future needs (e.g. hide/show buttons, vocabulary for building language).



How can I implement AAC in my classroom?

AAC systems are more likely to successfully support communication when they are used in all of the environments that the student accesses. If AAC is available and easily accessible as well as used and modelled in functional ways throughout the school day.

Do I use the AAC system for all classroom activities?

Yes, a student's AAC system should be available in all classroom activities even when expressive language is not the primary goal. Modelling key concepts or language on the student's AAC system throughout the day supports receptive language and overall use of the system as a communication tool. Some of the best opportunities for using and modelling on the AAC system are not in structured teaching situations (e.g. modelling *more* and *finished* in a song, modelling verbs to describe things classmates are doing). It is important that the

device is used in a meaningful way that elicits a response from others.

This is true even at times when the child may use the device in an unexpected way. For example if the student is exploring the device during mat time they could be redirected *"Thanks X, its my turn to talk now, you can tell me about that in 5 minutes."*



Also remember that learning to read and write is really important for children with complex communication needs. Many people with AAC make use of the alphabet to help clarify a spoken message (i.e. they talk and then spell a word if it is not understood), they may also make

use of writing to prepare longer messages that are difficult to speak out loud / if speech is limited. As children who use AAC learn to read and write, they should have access to frequently used words as well as the alphabet to spell words on-the-fly as needed.

- **Provide access to AAC** (in order to learn communication skills and to participate, children with complex communication needs must have easy access to their AAC system)
- **Provide lots of opportunities for communication** (provide opportunities across diverse settings and with a range of communication partners - facilitates generalization of communication skills)
- **Develop motivating activities** (children are more likely to communicate and join in if activities are motivating and enjoyable)
- **Wait for a response** (children who use AAC may require more wait time to prepare their response - don't rush)
- **Respond to communication attempts** (our response to the student's attempts help them to understand that communication is a powerful tool)

*Communication
is a
two-way process!*

For students using AAC their teachers and other education staff play a special role in successful communication.

These are some strategies to help facilitate communication.



10 Tips for implementing AAC throughout the school day:

1. Start with small goals. Try choosing one core word to practise for the week (e.g. more). Once you feel confident with this add another word (e.g. more & finished)
2. Use the person's AAC system to model what you are saying and what the individual could say by saying the words as you press the buttons
3. Use 'Think-Alouds' to talk about what you are doing on the device and what you are looking for.
4. Model key language that is relevant to an activity e.g. concept words, verbs
5. Interpret and respond to the individual's communicative attempts even when these are accidental or in play
6. Wait! You may need to allow for increased processing time for the individual to process your request and then formulate a response on their talker
7. Encourage the individual to transport their AAC system with them between activities and between classrooms at school
8. Expect communication and ensure all staff are aware of the expectations and goals for the child.
9. Model, expand and stretch. As a general rule model at the child's communication level + 1 extra word. Remember to model a range of language functions including commenting, protesting, questions etc.
10. Embed use of the device into daily routines



How much time will I need to integrate AAC into my lesson plans?

Implementing AAC into lesson plans should not be time consuming. Successful implementation of AAC occurs in classrooms that map core language onto the lesson plans and curriculum. This can be done in many ways, including:

Incorporate with your lesson plan

Look at your lesson plan and choose one or two core words for each activity that you can model on each child's system.

Script for activities

Have some language scripts available for common activities in the classroom. For example have some core words/phrases scripted to model in book sharing.

Use the electronic whiteboard

Most AAC systems have PC software that can be downloaded and displayed for modelling on the electronic whiteboard.

Sentence strips can be printed from PC software and displayed around the classroom to help us learn the child's system and provide a visual prompt for the child to use the system at key moments (e.g. to ask for a break).

Once you are familiar with the child's AAC system it won't need a large amount of time to implement throughout the day. Remember that the child is learning the system too and it is ok if you don't know everything; just talk it through as you are modelling on the system.

How do I know if I am using it correctly?

It takes babies 12 months of listening to language before they may start to experiment with words which we as adults respond to. This is the same for children learning to use an AAC system. They may need a period of time exposed to the AAC system and seeing others use their AAC system before they initiate using it. If you are interpreting the child's attempts on the AAC as meaningful and if you are using the AAC system in a meaningful and functional way then you are supporting that child to learn their AAC system.

Be aware of the level of difficulty in what you are asking the student to do. For most children using AAC, communication is hard work. What may seem relatively easy could in fact require a good deal of effort for them.

Do your best to keep it fun, light, and respectful.

Remember, you are making a huge difference in this child's life by supporting them to have a voice at school!



Important to know!



- Using AAC will not stop a child who is capable of developing speech from talking. Studies have shown that the use of AAC actually improves speech development for children who are able to physically produce speech (Millar, Light, & Schlosser, 2006). AAC also improves language development.
- There are no general pre-requisites for AAC intervention except the desire to communicate. Anyone can use AAC. Children do not need to demonstrate specific skills in order to be a candidate for AAC. Just as typical children are provided with speech models, children who use AAC systems also need models of AAC to become competent communicators.
- AAC for children is the responsibility of every communication partner, not just the speech pathologist.
- Competence with AAC takes time, just like with any form of communication. Practice makes perfect! Students need lots of opportunities to practice using their AAC in different places and with different people across the day.

Where to get more information

- *Autism Association of Western Australia* www.autism.org.au
- *AAC Language Lab* <https://aaclanguagelab.com/>
- *Independent Living Centre* <http://ilc.com.au/>
- *Saltillo (Supplier)* <https://saltillo.com/>
- *Liberator (Supplier)* <http://liberator.net.au/>
- *Pixon Kit (PRC)* <https://www.prentrom.com/>
- *PODD* <https://cpec.org.au/>



Many websites offer free video tutorials on implementing AAC in the classroom setting and provide access to lesson plans and lesson plan templates.