

What is Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)?

According to the CDC, 1 in 54 U.S. children is now diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) by age 8. People with autism can have difficulty with communication. Children may have delayed speech and language, or their speech might be hard to understand.

Using vocal language can also be difficult for other reasons. Someone may have a speech impairment because they have Rett syndrome, Down syndrome, motor impairment, or have suffered a traumatic brain injury or stroke.

Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) provides a way for people who have difficulty communicating everything they'd like to vocally, to communicate and connect with the world. According to the American Speech Language Hearing Association, "AAC incorporates the individual's full communication abilities and may include any existing speech or vocalizations, gestures, manual signs, and aided communication. AAC is truly multimodal, permitting individuals to use every mode possible to communicate." AAC includes any form of non-vocal communication, such as gestures, sign language, picture symbols, and speech-generating devices (SGDs).

At Fraser, two of the most commonly used forms of AAC are picture symbols and SGDs. In this document, we'll provide an introduction to these two forms of AAC and outline some ways they might be used. We'll also discuss common AAC myths.

COMMON FORMS OF AAC AT FRASER

Picture symbols are pictures of different items or activities used to communicate about a desired topic. For example, an individual might have a board with several pictures of snack foods, so they can communicate which snack they'd prefer. Or it might be a page with photos of clothing items, so the individual can express what they'd like to wear without using vocal language. Picture symbols can be organized onto a board or in a book.

SGDs are electronic devices or programs that produce sounds and words when activated. An individual touches either a picture or a



button associated with a picture, and then the device says the word or phrase the individual selected. Speech-generating devices can be tablets, smartphones, computers, or even smartwatches. Some also use an electronic keyboard to type out a message.

AAC MYTH: INDIVIDUALS MUST BE A CERTAIN AGE OR HAVE CERTAIN SKILLS TO USE AAC.

There are no prerequisites for using AAC. It can help people with communication needs regardless of their age and physical or intellectual abilities. An SGD can be activated in a variety of ways. Some SGDs are activated by touch, but the devices can also be controlled with eye gaze, or in the case of famed physicist Stephen Hawking, through the movement of his cheek muscles.

AAC MYTH: USING AAC WILL PREVENT A CHILD FROM LEARNING TO COMMUNICATE VOCALLY.

Speech-language pathologists and researchers have found the opposite is true. In the article "The Impact of Augmentative and Alternative Communication Intervention on the Speech Production of Individuals With Developmental Disabilities: A Research Review," Millar, Light, & Schlosser found, "None of the 27 cases demonstrated decreases in speech production as a result of AAC intervention, 11%

showed no change, and the majority (89%) demonstrated gains in speech." Speech-language pathologists find that many children model what they hear from a speech-generating device. So they start to vocalize more frequently as they hear their device say words like "apple" or "doll."

WHAT OTHER WAYS CAN AAC HELP WITH SPEECH?

In addition to modeling the words of SGDs, AAC helps people increase speech for other reasons. "AAC Myths Revealed" states, "The presence of a communication device can result in 'reduced physical demands' and decreased 'pressure to speak.' When there is less pressure to speak, individuals might feel more comfortable speaking on their own.

"AAC Myths Revealed" also references "the scaffolding effect" regarding AAC and speech. For people who have lost speech due to a stroke or another type of brain injury, AAC can serve as "a cue to recall specific words and support a more complete conversation using their natural speech."

AAC SUPPORTS ACCESS TO COMMUNICATION FOR ALL

Being able to speak and ask for what you want is an easy way to communicate. However, sometimes speech isn't possible

for individuals. Learning to value complementary forms of communication can help ease the burden on those who may struggle with vocal communication. For example, some people with autism find it difficult to speak when they're experiencing sensory overload.

Eden Summerlin of the Autisticats describes going to a mall and becoming overwhelmed by colored strobe lights in one shop, loud music, and people everywhere. Eden writes, "I could feel myself withdrawing, losing speech...I wanted to say something funny to Abby, but when I realized that the words wouldn't come out, I thought, 'Oh well, it wasn't that important anyway.' But then I thought, 'Wait, I have AAC. Why not use it?' I've used my AAC before in shutdowns and meltdowns, but never just because I was feeling too overstimulated to talk (while being completely fine otherwise). It felt incredibly liberating."

By using AAC when they couldn't speak, Eden communicated when previously they likely would've just said nothing. AAC can help individuals learn to vocalize more, and it can fill in gaps when speech isn't possible. Different forms of communication have value. Understanding that can help all of us support people who are non-vocal communicators or have difficulty communicating everything they'd like to communicate, which ensures everyone has a voice.



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