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Other topics in the ‘Focus on...’ series

Accessing communication aids and computers
Communicating with patients who have speech/language difficulties
First steps
Let your hands do the talking
Speaking with someone who uses AAC
Using symbols for communication
What can I say?

These leaflets are funded by

who swim, ran and cycled
to fundraise for this CM resource

Focus on...

What is AAC?
Introduction to Augmentative and Alternative Communication
Focus on...Let Your Hands do the Talking

methods of augmentative communication. (See also leaflet
Sign Language, Makaton and Signalong are examples of unaided
pointing, eye pointing, facial expressions, vocalisations, British
not involve any additional equipment. Body language, gestures,
There are many types of AAC. Unaided Communication does
communicate brings more opportunities for education, work,
difficult to understand what others are saying. This might be
more concrete form of communication may be easier to use.
AAC can also help with understanding. Some people find it
difficult to understand what others are saying. This might be
due to a stroke, a learning disability or a hearing impairment,
example if others use some form of AAC, like drawing or writing
control a scanning system or even an eye gaze controller. (See
What is Augmentative and Alternative Communication?
Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) is the term
used to describe various methods of communication that are
used to get around problems with ordinary speech. AAC involves
simple systems such as pictures, gestures and pointing, as
well as more complex techniques involving powerful computer
technology.
Some kinds of AAC are actually part of everyday communication,
for everyone. For example, waving goodbye or giving a ‘thumbs
up’ instead of speaking. Or pointing to a picture, or a foreign
country. However, some people have to rely on AAC most of
the time.
Why would people use AAC?
AAC is used to help people express themselves. Some people,
both children and adults, find communication difficult because
they have little or no clear speech. There are many possible
causes for this including cerebral palsy, stroke, head injury,
motor neurone disease or learning disability. Other people,
for example those with autism spectrum disorders, find spoken
communication difficult because they do not understand how
language works and may find it difficult to connect socially.
A more concrete form of communication may be easier to use.
AAC can also help with understanding. Some people find it
difficult to understand what others are saying. This might be
due to a stroke, a learning disability or a hearing impairment,
example if others use some form of AAC, like drawing or writing
or pointing to things, to back up what they are saying, that may
help people to understand.
Difficulty with communication is a common, but under-
recognised, condition. An estimated 1 in 100 people have
significant communication difficulties and might be helped by
some form of AAC.
Better communication, using AAC, could improve their quality
of life and increase their participation in society. Being able to
communicate brings more opportunities for education, work,
relationships and independence.
What does AAC include?
There are many types of AAC. Unaided Communication does
not involve any additional equipment. Body language, gestures,
pointing, eye pointing, facial expressions, vocalisations, British
Sign Language, Makaton and Signalong are examples of unaided
methods of augmentative communication. (See also leaflet
Focus on...Let Your Hands do the Talking)
Aided Communication involves additional equipment that may
be paper-based or electronic, often referred to as ‘low-tech’ or
‘high-tech’.
Low-tech communication systems do not need a battery to
function and include: pen and paper to write messages or draw;
alphabet and word boards; communication charts or books with
pictures, photos and symbols; particular objects used to stand
for what the person needs to understand or say.
High-tech communication systems need power from a battery
or mains. Most of them speak and/or produce text. They range
from simple buttons or pages that speak when touched, to very
sophisticated systems. Some high tech communication systems
are based on familiar equipment such as mobile devices, tablets
and laptops, others use equipment specially designed to support
communication.
Some people use spelling to create messages, but good reading
and spelling skills are not essential for AAC because there are
powerful systems based on using symbols, pictures, photos or
objects instead.
What about people who can’t press keys?
There are lots of solutions for people who would have difficulty
physically operating a piece of equipment. Accessibility options
include a keyboard, a pointer, a switch to control a scanning
system or even an eye gaze controller. (See also Focus on...Accessing Communication Aids and Computers.)
What is the best kind of AAC system to use?
There is no ‘best’ type of AAC system. Each system has its own
pros and cons; the most suitable one for an individual will depend
on their abilities, needs and personal preferences.
Many people have more than one AAC method and choose
which to use depending on the listener and the particular
situation. Low tech may be needed when high tech breaks down.
How do people get the AAC system that they need?
There are many options so it is a good idea to get specialist
advice in order to identify the most appropriate AAC system or
systems. The starting point is usually to contact the local speech
and language therapy service. They may be able to help, or they
may refer on to a specialist AAC service.
There is a list of AAC assessment services on the Communication
Matters website.

Will AAC affect speech development?
AAC does not stop someone speaking – in fact it can often help
to improve speech. Speech is usually quicker and easier than
AAC so people will always use speech and gesture when they
can. But all forms of communication are equally valid – whatever
works best at the time to get the message across.
How long does it take to learn to use an AAC system?
There is no single answer to this because AAC systems vary
so much. It may take some time to do the people who need to use them. Some
people will be able to use systems almost straight away; others
will require a long period of learning, practice and a great deal of
support.
Learning to communicate using an AAC system can be a
challenging task. Getting to grips with how an AAC system works
technically is sometimes relatively straightforward but it can take
longer to learn to use it in conversation.
Rather like learning to communicate in a foreign language, a lot
of teaching and practice may be needed in order to feel confident
about using the skill in real life. Seeing someone else using the
same method of communication, as a ‘role model’, can be
very helpful.
As communication is life-long, people using AAC systems never
stop learning how to express themselves more fluently. Ongoing
support and training for both the person using AAC and their
family and support staff is very important.
Is it difficult to communicate with a person who uses
AAC?
The first conversation with someone using AAC might seem
strange and a bit awkward. The important thing is not to focus on
the AAC system, not to worry about how it works, but to focus
on the person using the AAC system and to listen to what they
are saying.
It may take effort on both sides but this will be well worthwhile.
Any AAC system is far, far better than not being able to
communicate at all. (See also leaflet Focus on...Speaking with
someone who uses AAC.)
What is Augmentative and Alternative Communication?

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) is the term used to describe various methods of communication that are used to get around problems with ordinary speech. AAC includes simple systems such as pictures, gestures and pointing, as well as more complex techniques involving powerful computer technology.

Some kinds of AAC are actually part of everyday communication, for everyone. For example, waving goodbye or giving a ‘thumbs up’ instead of speaking, or pointing to a picture in a foreign country. However, some people have to rely on AAC most of the time.

Why would people use AAC?

AAC is used to help people express themselves. Some people, both children and adults, find communication difficult because they have little or no clear speech. There are many possible causes for this including cerebral palsy, stroke, head injury, motor neurone disease or hearing disability. Other people, for example those with autism spectrum disorders, find spoken communication difficult because they do not understand how language works and may find it difficult to connect socially. A more concrete form of communication may be easier to use. AAC can also help with understanding. Some people find it difficult to understand what others are saying. This might be due to a stroke, a learning disability or a hearing impairment, for example. If others use some form of AAC, like drawing or writing or pointing to things, to back up what they are saying, that may help people to understand.

Difficult communication is common, but under recognised, condition. An estimated 1 in 100 people have significant communication difficulties and might be helped by some form of AAC.

Better communication, using AAC, could improve their quality of life and increase their participation in society. Being able to communicate brings more opportunities for education, work, relationships and independence.

What does AAC include?

There are many types of AAC. Unaided Communication does not involve any additional equipment. Body language, gestures, pointing, eye pointing, facial expressions, vocalisations, British Sign Language, Makaton and Signalong are examples of unaided systems. The starting point is usually to contact the local speech and language therapists. They can provide specialist advice and create an AAC programme. Aided Communication involves additional equipment that may be paper-based or electronic, often referred to as ‘low-tech’ or ‘high-tech’.

Low-tech communication systems do not need a battery to function and include: pen and paper to write messages or draw; alphabet and word boards; communication charts or books with pictures, photos and symbols; particular objects used to stand for what the person needs to understand or say.

High-tech communication systems need power from a battery or mains. Most of them speak and/or produce text. They range from simple buttons or pages that speak when touched, to very sophisticated systems. Some high tech communication systems are based on familiar equipment such as mobile devices, tablets and laptops, others use equipment specially designed to support communication.

Some people use spelling to create messages, but good reading and spelling skills are not essential for AAC because there are powerful systems based on using symbols, pictures, photos or objects instead.

What about people who can’t press keys?

There are lots of solutions for people who would have difficulty physically operating a piece of equipment. Accessibility options include a keyguard, a pointer, a switch to control a scanning system or even an eye gaze controller. (See also Focus on... Accessing Communication Aids and Computers.)

What is the best kind of AAC system to use?

There is no ‘best’ type of AAC system. Each system has its own pros and cons; the most suitable one for an individual will depend on their abilities, needs and personal preferences.

Many people have more than one AAC method and choose which to use depending on the listener and the particular situation. Low tech may be needed when high tech breaks down.

How do people get the AAC system that they need?

There are many options so it is a good idea to get specialist advice in order to identify the most appropriate AAC system or systems. The starting point is usually to contact the local speech and language therapy service. They may be able to help, or may refer on to a specialist AAC service.

There is a list of AAC assessment services on the Communication Matters website.

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Focus on...Let Your Hands do the Talking

Sign Language, Makaton and Signalong are examples of unaided pointing, eye pointing, facial expressions, vocalisations, British body language, gestures, relationships and independence. What does AAC include?

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As communication is life-long, people using AAC systems never stop learning how to express themselves more fluently. Ongoing support and training for both the person using AAC and their family and support staff is very important.

Is it difficult to communicate with a person who uses AAC?

The first conversation with someone using AAC might seem strange and a bit awkward. The important thing is not to focus on the AAC system, not to worry about how it works, but to focus on the person using the AAC system and to listen to what they are saying. It may take effort on both sides but this will be well worthwhile. Any AAC system is far; far better than not being able to communicate at all. (See also leaflet Focus on...Speaking with someone who uses AAC).

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Focus on...

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