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# Communication is more than just speech

Communication aids are invaluable classroom tools for many who struggle to make themselves understood. **Janice Murray, Michael Clarke and Gillian Hazel** examine the options

Adequate speaking and listening skills are a key consideration in the delivery of the curriculum in the classroom. For many children, this is a challenge to achieve. Specifically, those children who have unintelligible speech or who have significant comprehension difficulties may struggle to make their own, unique contribution in class. There are many children with a variety of long-term conditions affecting speech, language and communication who can benefit from strategies and tools to support their communication and understanding, and consequently their participation in everyday life.

Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) offers just such benefits. AAC includes a wide variety of communication supports, including:

- pictures and photos
- signs, such as Makaton vocabulary and Signalong
- symbols, such as Picture Communication Symbols (PCS) and Widgit Symbols
- words.

Pictures, photos, graphic symbols and words may be organised into a chart or book. The child can indicate or point to them as a substitute for saying the word. Using graphic symbols is now common

## Voice output communication aids can offer the child access to tens of thousands of items of vocabulary

place in many schools to signpost areas of the school, symbolise the timetable for those children struggling with the routine of the school day and who need to know what is happening next, and aid development of literacy skills.

AAC may also refer to voice output communication aids (VOCAs). These are devices that offer the child an alternative spoken voice of their own. VOCAs can be fairly simple in their capacity, such as single message switch devices. By hitting a switch or activating a symbol the user can “speak” simple utterances. Such devices can be useful, for example, in allowing a child to take the role of saying the repeating line in a story, (for example, “we’re going on a bear hunt”), for taking a message around the school and for ordering snacks or lunch.

There are also more sophisticated VOCAs, offering more than a single message, which can provide class based, subject specific vocabulary. This sort of vocabulary can also be stored on dynamic display devices.

Voice output communication aids can offer the child access to tens of thousands of items of vocabulary and

novel ways to construct their utterances, in just the same way as a typically speaking child. The choice of devices for a child is dependent on many factors and requires a considered assessment. More than one device can be used to achieve access to the curriculum. The pupil may have their own device or communication book and the class may use a different device that everyone can take turns in accessing. Such a community of users can only encourage and reinforce the positive view of AAC as a valid form of communicating and learning.

Whilst such tools are invaluable to children, they are not a solution on their own. Coupled with the provision of suitable AAC tools, it is the knowledge, skills, attitudes and expectations of those working and learning with the child that will ultimately influence communication and participation for children.

Below are some examples of communication grids for use with communication books or VOCAs. You will see there is a range of pre-programmed vocabularies that can include curriculum specific vocabulary.



The case for supporting children through AAC is compelling. Without the support of AAC and VOCAs children will not have the same opportunities as their speaking peers and will not be able to demonstrate their skills and abilities. A huge range of AAC is available to enable children with speech and

communication difficulties to take their rightful place in the classroom. Specialist knowledge and skills are available to support educators, children and families. However the immense potential for AAC to change the lives of children is as yet unmet. Historically, there are a number of barriers that have hindered the successful provision and use of AAC systems and services, including:

- a scarcity of specialist assessment services to identify the best form of AAC for the child. Where excellent services do exist they are often under-resourced
- a lack of coherent policy to promote developments in service delivery
- inadequate funding to support the provision of AAC for individuals who may benefit from them
- insufficient knowledge of AAC across the children’s workforce.

As a consequence, for example, where a child may be fortunate enough to receive an AAC system, there may be limited experience amongst the front line staff to help the child develop an understanding of their system and enable them to use it effectively. A good analogy here is learning to play the piano. If, as a parent, you invest money in the hope that your child will some day be a proficient and independent pianist, you would expect it to take time and effort, not just from the child but also from yourself, the teacher involved and perhaps a few indulgent aunts along the way. Interestingly, this process is rarely applied to AAC. When a device is purchased, it is often left to the child or their family to use their best efforts, without the benefit of any real knowledge or understanding, to make it work.

Having recognised the potential benefits of AAC and some of the barriers to effective AAC support, the situation across the UK is beginning to change. For example, in England, the Bercow Report and the subsequent

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Better Communication Action Plan, both instigated by the former Department for Children, Schools and Families, specifically highlighted the need for AAC support for children. Consequently, some AAC services are seeing improvements in investment. Local education authorities and grass roots educators are recognising the benefits for the individual and society in general of enabling people to contribute within their community via adequate communication systems. AAC offers children this possibility. [SEI](http://www.communicationmatters.org.uk)

### Further information

Janice Murray, Michael Clarke and Gillian Hazel are from Communication Matters, a national charity promoting the understanding and awareness of AAC. The organisation’s website also provides a comprehensive list of currently available products: [www.communicationmatters.org.uk](http://www.communicationmatters.org.uk)

Communication Matters has received funding from the BIG Lottery Fund to co-ordinate a ground breaking three and half year research project with the aims of identifying the need for AAC, mapping the range and type of AAC services and documenting evidence of good practice in AAC work in an accessible database. It is hoped that this evidence will provide critical support for service developments and knowledge and skill development in the workplace to meet the needs of children who benefit, or have the potential to benefit, from AAC.

