

COMMUNICATION MATTERS



Focus on...

What is AAC?

Introduction to Augmentative
and Alternative Communication



www.communicationmatters.org.uk





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 or gesturing, 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 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, 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.

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 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.



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 and so 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*).



Useful Resources

- **Other Ways of Speaking** This booklet provides information about children and young people who use a variety of different ways to communicate, how to support them and where to go for further information. Published by Communication Matters & The Communication Trust. Available from www.communicationmatters.org.uk
- **The Power of Communication** Nine-minute video introducing a variety of types of AAC and users, aiming to provide a starting point for more informed decision-making on AAC service delivery and planning for managers. View online on the homepage at www.communicationmatters.org.uk
- **AACknowledge – The AAC Evidence Base** A searchable database of AAC research publications, plain language summaries, case studies, FAQs, factsheets, glossary of terms and references/links to help learn more about AAC. Website: www.aacknowledge.org.uk
- **AAC Forum** An online, open discussion forum for asking questions, airing views and reading other people's ideas on important AAC topics (searchable). Visit: www.communicationmatters.org.uk/aacforum
- **A Right to Speak: Ways to Communicate** A set of engaging AAC awareness-raising materials funded by NHS Education for Scotland (NES) as part of Scotland's 'Right to Speak' project and developed by CALL Scotland. The materials provide an introduction to communication support needs and to AAC for people who have no previous knowledge; included are short videos, posters, online learning module & printable resources. View/Download from: www.aacscotland.org.uk
- **1Voice – Communicating Together** 1Voice is a UK charity which promotes families supporting each other to overcome the isolation that being unable to speak can bring. Local 1Voice groups organise events where people who use AAC and their families can meet and encounter role models. Email: info@1voice.info Website: www.1voice.info

Further Information

Communication Matters is the UK wide charity which works for and brings together everybody who has an interest in AAC. Please contact *Communication Matters* for details of CM Study Days, Roadshows and the National AAC Conference.



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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?

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