



AAC and Use of Phones and Mobile Devices in School

Communication Matters Statement

Communication Matters welcomes the Government guidance (DfE, 2026) on the use of mobile phones during the school day, announced in January 2026. We also welcome the statement within the guidance that students with a disability must not be disadvantaged by this policy. Reasonable adjustments must be made under the Equality Act (Gov.UK 2010) for specific pupils when required, including for children and young people who use technology as their voice.

Having little or no intelligible speech is classed as a medical condition. A child or young person who uses augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) will have been assessed by a speech and language therapist as needing AAC resources to communicate, take part in learning, and be part of the school community.

Where schools have a Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) scheme (DfE, 2026) to facilitate the use of laptops or tablets for learning, a child or young person who uses AAC should be exempted from this policy to ensure not only do they have their devices for learning but also for communication at any time needed. BYOD policies should include the need to use AAC and that such equipment should not be withheld or refused as the essential voice of the child or young person.

AAC devices are often powerful computers due to the way communication software functions. As portable communication systems they may be able to access other functions not required for learning in school e.g. texts. It may be possible to use communication software in 'airplane mode' by turning off wi-fi access, but not always. Schools will need a policy in place, drawn up with the relevant AAC professional and family for each individual AAC user to ensure the appropriate access for software updates and functional use.

Communication is a fundamental human right (Bercow, 2008) for all children. We are concerned that the use of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) and Assistive Technology (ATech) for learning may be viewed by some professionals and families as having access to a phone without fully understanding how vital these resources are for children and young people with little or no speech when used for developing cognition, communication, connection and to access the curriculum (Murray, 2024). AAC and ATech are not entertainment systems, telephones or social media portals but sophisticated digital resources that support communication, connection, learning and therapeutic activities (RCSLT, 2023).

AAC resources provide children with little or no speech with their own voice to support their development in the same way as other children. The use of such equipment should never be rationed, refused or removed. The activities these students undertake require the active engagement of a knowledgeable communication partner, frequently under the guidance of speech and language therapists or IT specialists.

AAC is often an alternative pencil to access the curriculum, especially for developing language and literacy once they get to school. Children who are using AAC need the same right to express their wishes, opinions, thoughts and needs in the same way as every other child (Murray, 2004). Having access to AAC without rationing gives them a voice to be able to develop relationships, advocate for themselves and fulfil their own potential.



For children who use AAC and ATech we need professionals to understand the benefits of bespoke communication and learning packages, encourage joint interactions, modelling and shared learning on a consistent basis in each environment the child accesses. Time limits on usage are not relevant as a child should always have access to their voice. Best practice guidance should be followed for learning to use AAC and students should not be made to feel guilty or shamed that the use of AAC is essential for their cognitive, language and social development.

References

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RCSLT (2023), Written evidence submitted by the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT), <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/125539/pdf/>