

# COMMUNICATION MATTERS



*Focus on...*

## Speaking with someone who uses AAC



[www.communicationmatters.org.uk](http://www.communicationmatters.org.uk)



## Introduction

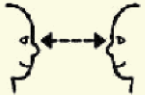


Talking with someone who uses AAC for the first time can seem a daunting process. Thoughts such as 'Will I understand them?', 'Will they understand me?', 'What will I do if it all goes wrong?' are all too common. This leaflet has been designed by people who use AAC to offer advice on how to alleviate some of these concerns and help you to enjoy your interaction with them.

## The Situation



- If possible choose to communicate in a quiet environment with minimal background noise so you can concentrate on the conversation.



- Face the person you are talking with - we all find it easier to communicate naturally when we can pick up visual clues like body language, gesture and facial expressions.
- Everyone communicates in a different way - this is exactly the same for someone who uses AAC. Start off by asking if there is anything specific that they need to help them be successful in your interaction.
- If you are not sure how the person indicates 'yes' and 'no', ask.

## Starting Off



Before you start a conversation be aware that however brief the interaction, you need to give more time to the person who uses AAC than you would with a speaking person. Be prepared to give that time.

- When you ask a question wait for a reply. Don't worry about the long silence while you wait for that reply.
- A good start to the conversation boosts everyone's confidence. Make eye contact and speak directly with the person using AAC, not their assistant.
- If you have never listened to someone using AAC before in a conversation, then let them know - they will be patient and help you the best they can.
- Start with concrete subjects such as the current situation you are both in.
- Keeping your own utterances short and simple helps the person who uses AAC and gives them chance to speak, but do avoid just asking questions which require 'yes' and 'no' answers as this quickly becomes boring for everyone.
- It is tempting to speed up communication by finishing off the person's sentence for them. Avoid this as, all too often, it is where misunderstandings start.



## Developing Conversations

- Take the time to make sure you have understood the person using AAC correctly by rephrasing or paraphrasing their response.
- The pace of AAC interaction is slower, so it helps to introduce one topic of conversation at a time.
- Be clear when you are changing the topic; the user may lose subtle clues from your face as they look down to their system.
- It is much harder for someone using AAC to interject into a conversation. They will appreciate it if you make time and invite questions, rather than expect them to question.
- Asking questions is important in conversation, but be aware that there are different types of questions. It is good to structure a conversation by only asking one question at a time. Questions starting with 'who', 'what', 'where', 'when', 'why', 'how' and 'if' will elicit a more detailed response; it is worth waiting for the answer.



## Repairing Misunderstandings

Misunderstandings happen all the time in normal conversation. We all use little phrases like 'Hang on a minute did you say...'

- People who use AAC cannot use these easily. It really helps if you watch their face and if you see confusion check they have understood. Don't be afraid to ask 'Did you mean...' or 'Could you say that again?'.
- If you get really lost check out three things:
  - Who are we talking about
  - What situation are we talking about
  - When did the situation being talked about take place: in the present, past or is yet to take place?



## Ending Conversations

- When the flow of conversation is interrupted or slow, it can feel like hard work. This can lead to fatigue and loss of concentration. This is more likely to happen to you than the person who uses AAC; they are used to conversations being this way. It is perfectly acceptable to ask them for a break, but if the conversation has not been completed then it is only polite to say you will return to finish it.
- Equally, some people who use AAC find using their system tiring and need a break too before the conversation is finished. If you sense they are getting tired, then it helps to suggest a break.
- Most of us start to end conversations using non-verbal clues, looking away, fidgeting, etc. Remember the person using AAC may not see these clues as they are looking down at their system. They are not missing cues; it is simply that they can't see them. It can be helpful to warn them that you need to move on or have to go. It is also courteous to check they have had their say before you do end the conversation.



## Last Thoughts

We hope this leaflet has given you some thoughts and insights into communicating with someone who uses AAC.

As with all new ways of communicating, practice makes perfect. The more you engage with people who use AAC, the better you will become. Remember that people who use AAC want to talk to you; they understand how you feel and will help you all they can.

### **Augmentative and Alternative Communication**

**(AAC)** is the term used to describe methods of communication which can be used to supplement the more usual methods of speech and writing when these are impaired.

AAC may include unaided systems such as signing and gesture, as well as aided techniques ranging from picture charts to the most sophisticated computer technology currently available.

AAC can be a way to help someone understand, as well as a means of expression.

## Useful Resources

- **The Power of Communication: DVD from Communication Matters**

The DVD celebrates and promotes communication in all its forms. Available from Communication Matters (see address below).

- There are a series of really good videos on the AAC Scotland website: [www.aacscotland.org.uk/Home/](http://www.aacscotland.org.uk/Home/)
- There are plenty of online resources on the Communication Matters website: **[www.communicationmatters.org.uk/](http://www.communicationmatters.org.uk/)**
- Why not join the AAC Forum to find out more from people who use and work with AAC. Instructions on how to join are available here:  
**[www.communicationmatters.org.uk/page/aac-forum](http://www.communicationmatters.org.uk/page/aac-forum)**



- Communication Matters is also on Facebook:  
**[www.facebook.com/communicationmattersuk](http://www.facebook.com/communicationmattersuk)**  
and Twitter: **@Comm\_Matters**



- The AACknowledge website is for those interested in the latest research, summarised in Plain English:  
**[www.aacknowledge.org.uk/](http://www.aacknowledge.org.uk/)**
- AAC E-Learning is a 20 minute online course on an introduction to AAC:  
**[www.aacelearning.org.uk/](http://www.aacelearning.org.uk/)**

## Further Information

Please contact *Communication Matters* for more information on this topic or to obtain other leaflets in the *Focus on...* series.



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

Accessing communication aids and computers

Communicating with patients who have  
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First steps

Let your hands do the talking

Using symbols for communication

What can I say?

What is AAC?

These leaflets are funded by



who swam, ran and cycled  
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