

AAC Q and A
Working with Families
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What are some preconceptions or myths that parents may have about AAC?

- Parents are overwhelmed and not trained in how to stimulate language. They may have mistaken notions regarding the ease with which language will be produced once a student is supplied with a speech generating device. They often do not realize how much effort will be required on their part. The device does not do the talking for the child. We have to teach the child how to use the device to communicate. This requires extensive exposure, practice, modeling and use of the device during a wide variety of activities. Parents frequently do not realize that they will still need to be interpreting their child's communicative attempts. I often provide the analogy of giving a child a book and just expecting them to be able to read it. We wouldn't do this without first teaching the child to read.
- A second preconception that parents may have is that an AAC device will impede verbal language production and that their child may become reliant on the device.
- Parents are also often concerned about the stigma associated with their child being different and having a communication device. They typically want their child to fit in and have friends.

What question do you get asked the most by parents/caregivers?

- They are most often concerned about the technical aspects of a device: being adequately trained on it, knowing how to troubleshoot, knowing how to program the device, etc. This is oftentimes why I initially start with low tech during an initial phase of implementation. What I really want to do is ensure that families understand that AAC is just a tool. What we are really trying to teach is interaction and reciprocal exchange, the joy of communication and how a child does not need to just use behavior to communicate.
- Parents frequently ask me about customizing a device long before the existing basic vocabulary is even developed. I don't want parents to get caught up in not being able to use the device because it doesn't contain every single word that they want. Also, encouraging creative use of icons has long-term benefits. One of my students wanted to request a graham cracker. There was no icon for this particular cracker so he navigated to the shapes folder and selected the rectangle to symbolically represent a graham cracker.

- A frequent question once a child has a device is, when will the child be able to produce complete sentences? My initial objective is to develop functional communication and to increase communicative intentions and spontaneous use of the device. Emphasizing these components typically leads to vocabulary development and language expansion.
- Referencing language acquisition principles, children typically require a vocabulary base of approximately 35-50 words to begin combining utterances. As a range of vocabulary develops, combining words to form sequence utterances becomes increasingly possible.

What parental concern is the most prevalent?

- There being a necessity for AAC. What parents typically say when the topic of AAC is broached is that they “understand what their child wants”. This then leads to an entire discussion about the importance of a wide range of communication functions, not just the child expressing what their needs and preferences are. Many parents have not even considered the range of communication functions such as: saying hi and bye, using polite forms, asking and answering questions, making comments and self advocating. Also, I point out how important it is for a child to be easily understood by all listeners.
- Recently, I very often hear parents report that their child had been trialed with a device and that they “didn’t like it or refused to use it”. This most likely reflects increased exposure to technology for independent entertainment purposes as opposed to using technology for communication purposes. Parents have reported that the child is frustrated and angry when an iPad is limited to communication rather than preferred sites.

Training can’t be a one and done type of event. What is the parents' role on the team?

- The parents' role on the team is critical. It has been my experience that children or students that do not use a device in the home setting rarely become proficient communicators. Expecting a child to become a functional communicator with use in just a school setting will not be sufficient.
- A key component to the importance of home and community use is the wide range of communication opportunities. When we think about communication just in our everyday lives, what is it we communicate about? We talk about something that we heard that is interesting. When we share news, it’s about something that we might find interesting or our listener might find interesting. Other things that we share or are most inclined to communicate might be things that are cool, novel, shocking, gross, cute, silly/funny, surprising, unusual, heartwarming, emotional, uppermost in our minds, etc. The home or community environments present rich opportunities for these types of experiences.

- An additional component to the importance of home practice is the nature of discourse requirements. In any school or clinical setting, the adult agenda is typically of paramount importance. Information is typically imparted, a question is asked and a student responds. The exchange is typically limited to adults asking questions and children responding. In a home environment, the strictures for discourse agreement are far less stringent.
- The goal is for our students to be independent and functional communicators. Prompt dependency is a huge consideration. Allowing the child to have opportunities to ask a question or make comments when they would not be “interrupting” is vital.
- The parents' role is to provide all these language rich opportunities for engagement, discussion, play. The home is a perfect place to practice fun and functional use of communication. There are no curriculum guidelines or other limitations. Parents can talk about foods, toys, friends, family members, pets, routines

How do you work with parents on an ongoing basis to make sure the AAC device is actually being used?

- Using a SETT model is exceptionally important in determining device recommendations. Understanding the communication culture in the home and the capacity of family members and caregivers will be important to determine an appropriate communication system.
- Making sure an AAC device is actually being used is a concern not just for the home but for the academic setting as well. There has to be some demonstrable benefit for using AAC. There has to be a favorable ratio to effort and reward.
- I typically focus most on those concepts or vocabulary words that will have the greatest impact on positive behavior. For the most part children without a viable means of communication use behavior as their primary mode of communication.
- These behaviors include tantruming, screaming, kicking, throwing things, breaking things, biting, scratching, pulling hair, eloping or running away, etc.
- Pairing behavior with a symbol is an important associative step i.e. refusals/rejections that usually are in the form of getting up and walking away, pushing, throwing, injurious behavior could instead be paired with a symbol for no, don't want, need a break.
- Giving a child a voice allows them to have more agency.
- In addition to self-regulatory vocabulary, I always ask parents: are there any words or ideas you would like me to focus on? One parent that I spoke to said the following [narrative about taking the student to the movies, spending money and not having any idea if the student enjoyed themselves]. This particular parent said to me that they would love it if the child could be taught words such as like and don't like. Also, their

child had never indicated in any way that they loved their parents so having the icon for love was important.

- Training includes the following components: communication functions, using the device as an adjunct to an activity, modeling without expectation and then modeling with expectation, prompting hierarchies, a list of dos and don'ts, demonstration rather than explanation of how it's done, demystifying AAC, offering reassurance and empowerment, and letting them know that effort and much repetition will be required. Training also includes how to accurately program vocabulary into the device. With that in mind, however, I also encourage parents to be creative and flexible if a concept is not pictured.
- I also point out to parents that multimodality communication is important. I never want the parent to think that they can only use the communication device for either input or output.

What are the most effective techniques to help parents implement AAC and promote functional language?

- Whenever I am working with a family, I always try to put myself in their shoes. Being a parent is hard enough let alone having a child with complex communication needs. Children with special needs can of course be considered a blessing or a gift, but to be sure they may also put strains on a marriage, on siblings, on the health of family members, on finances. I always try to be as kind and gracious as possible and meet the parents where they are at, listen carefully, and be a resource.
- Research has shown that approximately 70% of a nonverbal communicator's communication bids are ignored or misinterpreted. A first step in any communication program is for communication partners to be attentive to their child's communication overture.
- Communication may include vocalizing, showing, guiding, pointing, gesturing, signing, using facial expressions and/or body language, and looking at or getting desired item. If communication attempts are ignored or not met, the child may use behavior to communicate (i.e. whining, screaming, tantruming, leaving, throwing items, hitting, etc.)
- The majority of students that I have given a communication device to immediately go to find something other than the speech application. They often hand the device back, have thrown it, set it aside, taken my device. What we are asking them to do is use a device for the skill that is hardest for them when they have been using the device for something that they find the most enjoyable and rewarding.
- This is when I use the students' preferences for developing activities that may actually be more fun than scrolling through a device. I am always surprised that activities such as

bubbles, Playdoh, Legos, trains, farm sets, ball tracks can really be so appealing “to jaded consumers”.

- Requesting preferred or needed items forms the initial basis for communication. However most items are concrete and do not promote symbolic reasoning. If a child is limited to merely making requests for objects that can be readily pointed to or gotten in the environment, the likelihood of continued use of the device is extremely limited. My main goal is for the device not to be abandoned.
- Broadening the range of communication functions is the most critical aspect of AAC implementation.
- I found that the most effective way to create communication is to focus on some initial high potency words such as more and my turn. Creating activities where these words can be used in context will increase their spontaneous and independent use. Once these foundational words have been established then more vocabulary words are added and by now, the purpose and positive nature of communication have been developed.
- AAC implementation must include using visual supports during fun and functional, hands-on activities.
- Interactions with the student and device are not about grilling the student to locate and select an icon. It is about creating a context that fosters the need or desire to communicate.
- I’m sure most everyone has heard the phrase “modeling without expectation”. This is a skill that needs to be demonstrated to parents. Parents often think that they have to find every word on the device. They don’t.
- Withholding a desired item until the student communicates is not my preferred mode of instruction. Offering choices and modeling is a more powerful teaching method.
- Allowing a child to explore the device to “babble”, have sensory feedback, etc. is merely one component of device implementation. Such exploration will not teach the child how to use the device functionally for interactive purposes. Setting aside instructional talking time is necessary.
- When interviewing parents of successful AAC users (those who have graduated from devices and are verbal or those who still use a device for partnered communication) I noticed an important feature. These parents specifically marked use of the device as communication time, and they did not have other applications on the device. They allowed for periods of exploration when the child was alone but clarified that communication time involved a different form of behavior.
- Introducing the device for solitary purposes without guided instruction oftentimes leads to random and perseverative key selection. The child may then need to be re-instructed in how to use the device for communication rather than stimulation purposes. Many times, parents report when they try to use the device in a different way that upset

occurs. I would rather establish behavioral expectations at the outset rather than trying to extinguish behaviors later on.

- Opportunities for symbolic communication, making choices, indicating preferences are not just high-tech. Looking at a toy catalog and reading books together form foundational skills for AAC. As interactional activities decrease, so too does a child's pre-linguistic ability.
- Moving past self referencing is critical for all forms of language development and social skills. This is where I like to bring in activities such as will it float, is this a good idea?, should they be doing that? etc. Asking these kinds of questions is getting to the development of questioning students about what they think rather than just what they want. It is also another way to encourage answering yes/no questions. My premise is to promote more than just the child's ability to communicate preferences, needs, and wants.
- Pairing concepts that the child already uses gesturally with icons on a device is an excellent starting point to teach symbolic equivalency.
- Utilize preference based decision-making to promote more of a discussion rather than requesting. For instance, show a toy catalog and talk about what kinds of toys the child might like and then have them pick an item that someone else might like. That is increasing frame of reference and perspective taking which is another means to move a child past merely making requests for things they want. This is also another type of activity to promote comments such as cool, fun, like, etc.
- When I introduce a device, I do so in an interactive and engaging way. I don't just hand the device to the child and say have at it. I establish joint attention and joint referencing where we are both looking at the device together and I say something like, you know how much I love pets, I wonder what's behind the picture of the dog? If the child does not pick up the inferred cue, I may instruct and say go ahead and press the dog picture. I then label or discuss something that was revealed on the second screen. Next step would be to say what picture do you want to find out about? As you can see this is a turn taking and reciprocal activity.
- Another way I might introduce the device is timing finding the target icon. I might say to the student see how quickly you can find something and I would time them. Turning it into a race or a competition is oftentimes motivating for kids. I might then have them point to something in the room and then it would be my turn to try to find it on the device. I, too, would be timed.
- Emphasize actions. The majority of meaning in early language development is related to actions. Charades is a key early implementation activity.
- Early language concepts are learned as cognates or pairs up/down, stop/go, off/on, you/me (I), more/don't want.

- Early implementation strategies do not focus on teaching vocabulary. Goal is to try to increase engagement, interaction and to teach the child the joy of symbolic communication. What we are really attempting to do for these kids is give them a means to communicate other than with their behavior. Our efforts are to show students that they have a means to communicate and that it is a more reliable method to get what you want.
- Play games with the device and treat it like a dictionary: let's see if we can find this word/picture. Take turns "looking things up". Remember successful use of the device is not a solitary pursuit. There has to be engagement with a communication partner. It really is best if both partners have the same application but not essential.
- Effective AAC communicators: have the best literacy skills. Their ability to symbolically reason for reading allows them to develop associative skills for symbolic communication. We often won't know if the student is going to develop literacy capacity but an early emphasis on literacy should be promoted.
- Books in and of themselves are basically a form of AAC. There are pictures and words representing a narrative. Emphasizing literacy in the home is another critical component to effective AAC use. Providing Adapted books and teaching a parent how to use literacy to promote engagement and communicative intentions will be an important therapeutic goal.