

- Thanks, Jim, so much.

Welcome, everyone, thanks for taking time out of the middle of your day to come and hang out with me for a little while.

I'm Tana Neufeld and we're gonna spend the next hour talking about how to get started with AAC in the early intervention setting.

Everything that I'm gonna present on the screen you should have in your handout, but we are gonna walk through a couple web-based resources as well that might not be directly linked in your handout, so I'll try to make sure that everybody feels like they have the link to get to those as we move together today through the talk.

All right, so as we think about, you know, where this early intervention perspective is coming from, I just wanna share a little bit about who I am.

Well, I'm a speech language pathologist by training and I spend my whole caseload time working with non-speaking children.

Most of my caseload is under the age of five as I work through the early intervention program here in Colorado.

And I also am a private consultant for some families across the country as I work with them to coach them in their AAC experiences with their little ones.

I also work with older children and with young adults, so my practice spans the lifespan, but we're gonna be focusing mostly on my experience today with that early intervention group.

If you'd like to get in touch with me, I've included several ways to do so here on my About Me slide, including some ways that you can connect with me on social media if you have questions beyond today's talk or you wanna collaborate either ways.

So our goals today, as outlined in your learning objectives are we're really gonna focus in on how do you take what you're already doing in the IFSP process with your early intervention families and add an AAC lens to that process.

So I'm hoping that I'll be speaking in pretty common language for all of you today, a language that you're used to in your daily practice.

But if there's any acronym or other combination of words that you're not familiar with, please don't hesitate to interrupt me.

Pop a question in the Q&A section and we'll make sure that we clarify that as we move forward together.

We have three main goals.

We're gonna identify at least three strategies that you can use to bring AAC to your assessment process.

And that means, of course, the initial IFSP, that you might develop with families to qualify them for services, but also that ongoing assessment that you do as an EI provider as you're making sure that kids are making progress toward those global outcomes that are outlined in our IDEA mandates as providers.

We're also gonna tackle three resources that can help you obtain some AAC tools if you're interested in getting an early start with some of your little ones in the EI setting, and you don't have those resources available to you.

And then we're gonna round out by exploring at least three factors that you can consider when you're talking with families about AAC and talking with colleagues on your team about AAC,

especially those who might be a little bit less enthusiastic about the idea of introducing technology-based communication to children who are so young.

So we're gonna spend an equal amount of time on all of these goals today and then I'm going to leave a little bit of time at the end for question and answer.

My style is to kinda pause though throughout things.

And so I'll try to keep an eye on that Q&A as we go just to see if any relevant questions are coming up that could really add to our discussion today.

So I encourage you to be as interactive as you'd like to through the Q&A box and I'll do my very best to keep an eye on it.

We're gonna start out today by talking about that AAC lens, as I said, for our assessment, and our ongoing dynamic support of kids under five.

And then we're gonna identify some resources that can hopefully get AAC tools into your hands or into your centers and then talk about how we can really navigate this discussion about AAC with our families and colleagues, especially when it comes to those myths that may still be really prominent in the conversations that you're having.

So usually in the AAC field, we know that it's super important to get a comprehensive AAC assessment.

And in my work as an EI provider and also as an assistive technology consultant here in Colorado, it's very obvious that many providers are still feeling quite under-prepared when it comes to doing those comprehensive AAC assessments.

I'm sure many of you found as you started to practice that you didn't really get the training that you needed in graduate school, perhaps even the clinical hands-on experiences that you needed early on in your career to feel very comfortable in this area.

And so AAC assessments may not be something that you actually do as an EI provider and you may find that you're either in a waiting pattern or your families are on the never-ending waiting lists that may be prominent in your area for getting specialists on board to help you make these decisions.

So today we're gonna move forward not to give you tools to be a comprehensive AAC assessor. We'll give you some resources to go and continue to refine those skills if you're interested.

But today's not really about that.

Today's about the rest of us.

What do the rest of us do when we have kids on our caseload that we know could benefit from AAC, but we have no idea where to start and we don't have the tools to do that more comprehensive assessment yet? So I'm going to speak to that, more of what is being talked about in the field of AAC as kind of a universal design approach.

And hopefully by the time you end today, you realize, not only what you can do to get started with your families, but also where you can ask questions and make connections with others in the field to move forward with a more comprehensive assessment for those children that are indicating that they may need such.

So when I think about a AAC assessment in early intervention, the first thing I really wanna make sure that we can connect as providers is what we already understand about communication, what we already understand about language and pre-linguistic skills.

All of this is going to come into play as we make plans with families about how AAC technology might fit into their longer term support for their child.

So the very first thing in the list here of that AAC lens is we're gonna continue considering those communication skills.

And part of this is attained through your assessment that you're doing as an EI team.

I don't know how many of you in the room are actually participating in those qualifying assessments that families start with in their first step, or how many are just kind of picking up families that have qualified for the program and are now moving forward through, you know, avenues of intervention.

But regardless of where you land, at some point in time, you're assessing those communication skills.

You're making sure that that little one is developing according to the developmental expectations that we are striving for.

And so we're gonna just add to that lens today and hopefully give you a couple tools that you can think about to take that data that you're already collecting in your sessions and kind of organize it in a way that helps you plan for AAC-related tools and strategies.

The main area of current communication skills that we really wanna focus on for kids that we are identifying as complex communicators is really means and functions.

So whereas your IFSP-based assessment may focus on where that child is related to overall or broad communication skills and where they should be in their development for those skills, this piece is gonna take that information and go a little deeper and say, well, how is this child already communicating? What are the means that they're using? Then what are those means actually serving for that child? What are the functions or the communication purposes that are coming through those signals or behaviors, vocalizations, all of those ways that that child is using to start the communication journey with their family.

And then of course when you're considering communication skills, you're always considering what those next steps are in development.

And as you walk through your annual reviews for IFSPs and you're helping families decide how to add services or adjust schools, you're always thinking about what development helps you figure out for those next steps.

And that's still true in our AAC assessment.

Where we're gonna kinda connect AAC to that is when we're thinking about how to bridge from where that child is right now, their abilities, their communication abilities, and what their IFSP goals are outlined by their family.

Right in the middle is the bridge of tools and strategies, which is where AAC's gonna fit.

And it's actually gonna help us to think about development when we inform our features that we want on our AAC tools.

And we'll talk about that in a couple slides.

So very first AAC aspect for our lens here is we're thinking about current communication skills, especially those means and functions and the next steps according to what development is telling us, and also what happens with participation, right? Our IFSP is all about daily routines and all about helping that child participate in meaningful aspects of their life with their family. And so those next step skills sometimes are going to be much more hinged to family priorities and child priorities than they are to development.

The second bullet here, needs, is we really have to think, especially with our kids with multiple disabilities, what types of access needs do they have that are gonna inform the types of AAC that we can bring to that starter system that we wanna try out in the EI mainframe.

So we're not gonna have a lot of time to talk about specific access needs and how to problem solve those today, but they definitely need to be part of the puzzle when we're thinking about a starter system.

So we'll make sure that if we've got vision and motor on the radar for our kids, that we're collaborating with others on our team that can help us gain a better understanding about how to move forward with AAC given those circumstances.

And then of course child preferences come into play in our early intervention model often where we're meeting child and family where they are.

And so AAC's not gonna change that.

So hopefully today as we think about how to use some of these tools to reorient our data from assessment and give us a clear path to a starter system, we're still thinking about how to center that interaction in that family-child relationship.

AAC doesn't become our focus even though technology is involved, right? So we're always thinking about what is really the preference of that child and family in this interaction, and how do we help that AAC bridge add to the center action rather than take away from it? So I'm gonna pause and just check here and see if we've got any questions in the Q&A box yet.

I see several things in the chat, so lemme check that first, right.

So when I'm thinking about how to add to my early intervention assessment process with AAC in mind, there's several strategies that come to mind, but I put the key strategies here for us and we'll walk through them together as well as walking through some resources to help us navigate, collecting, you know, information in a way that we can make sense of.

Because when we veer away from standardized assessments or measures like the Bayley or the DAYC or others that you might be using in EI, it can get a little bit confusing to try to figure out what information is important and how to use that to actually make plans with regard to AAC. So hopefully some of the tools that I'm providing for you today and some of the frameworks to get you thinking about the information you're collecting will help add some clarity to what can sometimes feel like a murky subjective pool of information that you're not really sure what to do with.

But at the very top of the list here, something that we do prominently as EI providers, right? Is interview and use kind of informal ways of pulling valuable information from people that know these children best.

Usually their caregivers, maybe a daycare provider, a nanny, but most often their parents.

So I use a lot of interview beyond that initial family interview to try to set the stage for where I think AAC could fill in some of those gaps for a child and family that are working on establishing solid communication skills in the early years.

I put a couple tools here on your slide that I think would be, I think it's just one tool actually linked.

I'll show you a couple others in a minute that might help you kind of organize your interview process if you want to conduct a live interview with families over time, specifically geared at these questions around AAC.

Or there's some that you can actually give to families in print and then go through that questionnaire together as part of your coaching process.

So linked here on the slide you'll see there's an AAC compass functional communication survey, In the survey you can give to a family, specifically having them fill it out, maybe before a visit, during a visit, so that you can connect with them about it after the visit, you decide.

But it's a very informal way of gathering information related to communication signals that the child is already using within whatever routines the family can provide as an example of when those signals are happening.

And then also try to get to what the family thinks that signal means in that routine.

So you can see here that theme of means and functions coming through, but it's written in very parent-friendly language, so it's designed to really help that family look at what's already happening for communication with that child all throughout the day.

So you can get to that resource by clicking on the image here, but I think we'll take a moment to actually go explore some of this resource and another at the end of the talk if we have time today as well.

Additional tools that might be helpful for this idea of interview and questionnaires are also things like the Communication Matrix.

I don't know if anybody in the talk today has used the Communication Matrix, but it's a wonderful way to establish a baseline of how that child is currently communicating.

And then from that baseline to be able to pull in some information about what types of words do we wanna have available on an AAC system to really support building language from that starting point? So that's another option.

The Communication Matrix is an online tool that you can have families fill out directly, on their own if you'd like, or you can also do it more of an interview format over one or more sessions together as a team.

So two interview tools there to consider, this functional communication survey and also the Communication Matrix.

I also have a link set up in our resources that I'll show you if we have time at the end that walks through several other informal measures that you can use for this purpose of interview and questionnaire to really help you organize the information points around means and functions. In addition to interviewing and using questionnaires with caregivers, another big piece of what you do as an EI provider that's valuable when it comes to AAC planning is you do a lot of observing, right? Especially of those foundational and important interactions between the child and their caregivers.

And so through your coaching and through your observation, and I like to do many types of observation that I'll share about in a moment, you can also use these types of tools, these surveys and Communication Matrix tools to make additional observations about how that child is already communicating.

And again, it's not to decide necessarily what category or development of stage they're in.

When we're using these tools now, what we're trying to figure out is what is already happening in this family and how can this be a springboard for us to start building language in there? And we'll talk in just a moment about some tools to help us plan for that aspect specifically.

One type of observation that I really love to do in EI is indirect observations, especially when I have learners who are still trying to build the foundation of social-emotional engagement.

I know many of you probably noticed that a lot of your young ones who are complex communicators are still learning how to engage, how to regulate their emotions and their sensory systems in order to engage with other people and share in an activity.

And so that element can often be kind of a conundrum for us as AAC professionals to try to figure out where does AAC fit in with a little one who's still trying to learn how to engage in a one-on-one relationship, and then all of a sudden we're bringing in this technology or this tool and there's another point of focus that could really challenge that little one.

So when I find that I need several times to see things happen with these learners who are still learning to engage, I love to have mom and dad or other parents share videos that they've taken of really strong moments of interaction where lots of communication signals are happening and the parent is feeling very successful about how that went.

And then on the flip side, videos where things kind of fell apart and families feeling quite frustrated or the child's feeling quite dysregulated.

And you can use these indirect observation videos together in your coaching sessions to really look at them from an AAC perspective.

What are the signals I see? Did mom pick up on those? Did she interpret them in a way that you believed was accurate based on your observation from the outside? How did she respond to that interpretation? What words did she use? What actions did she use? Et cetera.

So with that, what we can start to form is a bigger library of what this child is already doing with their caregiver.

And with that information then, and others that we may gain from our interview and questionnaire process, we can start to create something called a communication dictionary or a signal inventory is another name that you may see used for this type of tool.

I've linked it here, an example of one here at the top left-hand side of your slide.

And again, this is focusing on the root of our question.

What are the means and functions present in this child's life? They may not be very conventional, they may be just things that parents understand, but when we create a communication dictionary, we're really taking all of those data points we can gather from that assessment interview and questionnaire and maybe some indirect observations to form almost a handbook of the ways in which this child is already engaging with their partners.

When you click on this link here, you'll see an example of a communication dictionary template that's available for you to use.

But the main columns of this template are at the root of what we're talking about today. It's what is the routine? What is the context? Which is in the left-hand side here that this interaction is happening within.

It might be a daily routine, it might be a tickle game, it might be bath time, something that a child really enjoys from a sensory perspective.

So whatever that routine is or whatever that context is, it goes on that far left-hand side.

And then that next column over is talking about what is the signal? So what is the child doing? What behavior, what pre linguistic skill, maybe even what word, if the child is speaking a little bit, what word is coming through in this routine? So anything that's a signal or a means is gonna go on that second column.

And then the third column is what are those closest to this child believe that this means? So what's the interpretation? Is this a request for you to do more tickles? Is this what I do when I

need you to give me a different toy in the bath? So all of those interpretations would go on that third column and we're gonna get those from caregivers.

And the caregivers are likely gonna have different meanings for some of these signals depending on the context, which is why it's really important to include that context piece as well as the signal and the meaning.

And then the part of this table that you can't see that's under the green graphic here is we also wanna consider what our responses are going to be.

So as you fill out that fourth column with a family, you might ask them a question like, what do you do when Joey signals that he wants this, right? So let's take an example.

And maybe Joey has a specific vocalization that he uses when he wants to have a snack.

And so during snack time, which is the context, Joey signals by making a certain vocalization and then mom or dad interprets that as he's hungry.

And so the fourth column would be, what do you do when Joey makes this vocalization? And so the parent might say, you know, we tell 'em, oh, I think you're hungry.

It is time for lunch.

I'll get you something to eat.

So that natural response is usually going to be what comes out from the parents.

I honor what Joey says, 'cause I know he's trying to tell me that he's hungry, so I'm gonna honor that in a natural responsive way.

But what we can add as providers in our AAC planning process to that response is we can say, okay, well, what words come out of that routine, out of that path that we just made with that family? What core words could we target in a language fashion in order to add to Joey's skills in this particular routine to achieve the goals that he has? So that's a communication dictionary, and again, that's gonna be something you fill out with the family, focusing on means and functions and then adding a little bit more to that element of response to help in our teaching process.

So then when we have those communication response columns kind of mapped out, what we can do as a team with the family is, as I said, focus in on those core words.

And I'll talk in a moment about some of the different types of words we think about when we're building starter systems for little ones in this arena.

But I did include here a template on the very bottom.

This one is already filled out for you for a blocks routine, just to give you an example.

But if you click on that in your slides, what you'll find is an empty template that you can use to walk through a routine with a family, using that communication dictionary flow, and then pausing at that response column and thinking together, well, what are the words that are coming through for this signal? What are some of the core words that we could target on an AAC tool? I do see that we have a question in the box.

I'm just gonna take a moment here to pause and see if it's one we can talk about now.

So the question is, can an AAC evaluation using these steps be a part of a virtual assessment as well? That's a fantastic question.

And in fact, I only do virtual EI assessments.

That is all I do and all I have done for about the last four years.

So absolutely, you can use these methods that we're talking about today over a virtual platform.

And I think that we don't have time to talk about all the nitty gritty in today's talk, but one of the things I think is essential for doing it over the platform is to really make sure you're letting the family know how you need their support to facilitate it.

There's gonna be a little bit more, you know, camera angles that you're going to need.

You might need that family to prep for your session virtually, which is common for EI telehealth anyway.

We're always informing our families of how they can prep for the specific goals that we have together in our sessions.

So if you'd like to chat about how this looks over telehealth, please reach out to me and I would love to to brainstorm with you and to share some of the lessons learned and the successes that I have encountered.

All right, so we're thinking today of course of that AAC starter system.

So no comprehensive evaluation has happened.

We're not really sure what this learner's gonna need for the longer term, but we know that AAC could be valuable and we wanna make sure that we get it going quickly.

And, you know, AAC as a starter system is really taking, as I said, that universal design approach where we're not claiming to know all the answers and get the perfect system right outta the gate, like we might if we did more of comprehensive evaluation.

But what we're trying to do is give that young learner and that young family, young to AAC, the chance to get their feet, you know, hit the ground running, so to speak.

How do we get in there and start exploring with some basic tools that fit a couple basic criteria so that we can learn a little bit more about what we want from an AAC assessment, a more comprehensive assessment? So we can learn a little bit more about that learner's access needs, for example, because learners who are this young and early to the AAC process, they're usually going to go through quite a bit of changes in the first few weeks and months of using the AAC system.

So sometimes if we jump in with an AAC assessment right out of the gate, we could miss a valuable opportunity to see that learner progress through that learning curve and we may then not make the best recommendations soon.

There's pros and cons to both.

Definitely need an AAC assessment before we move forward with any sort of equipment decisions, long-term for families.

But if we're starting out with a starter system approach, we definitely wanna make sure we're thinking about just a few key features.

So the very first thing is these systems need to be accessible to our learners.

Whether they're light tech or high tech, if this learner has a vision or a motor difficulty that's gonna impact their ability to access technology or print material in the way that we would expect, we're gonna need to rely on our OT, PT, and vision colleagues to really help us make sure that these tools are accessible for them.

They also need to be useful, which means that they need to have the words and the messages and the symbols represented to cover the basic needs in communication for that learner right now.

So in AAC, we call that coverage vocabulary.



And that is, what does this little one need right now to communicate more effectively, more specifically with their family? These tools also need to be feasible, which means that the team, the family, the child, and all the primary providers involved really need to see this as a doable solution for them.

They need to be bottomed to being able to use it and being able to be to use it consistently with the child.

And then you as the leader of that team, perhaps, need to be able to acquire this technology. So it needs to be feasible in that regard as well.

It also needs to be acceptable.

And so that means that it needs to really consider the child and the family's preferences in terms of things like portability, for example.

Or some families are very concerned about social stigma and they find certain technologies more acceptable than others based on that perspective.

Along the same line, certain families are gonna have different cultural and linguistic needs and so we need to make sure that those are represented on the starter tools as well.

And then lastly, we need them to be multimodal.

And in the early intervention space, especially, it's very important that we remember how and key it is to have more than one solution, right? The AAC system is not just the high tech system, it's actually a combination of all types of AAC, which I've listed here on the slide, including no tech.

And no tech isn't just sign language.

It's also gestures and also behaviors and less conventional signals that a child may be using. And so as we're building our starter system, we're gonna find that we continue to reinforce many of those signals in our intervention.

And that picture based AAC or those more traditional tools may not have a front and center role right away for some of our learners.

They may just be maybe, you know, the backup singer, so to speak, to some of these other strategies.

So it's not an all or nothing thing and it's also not a one-technology solution thing.

So we're definitely thinking about multimodal, which might include using some light tech and high tech as well together.

So we talked so far about using means and functions at the center of our question when it comes to where AAC can play a role.

We talked about using some of that communication signal or communication dictionary approach to really narrow in on what that child is already using to communicate and what we think it might mean.

And then I encouraged you to use things like a word map to figure out how language could be mapped on top of what is already happening in that family's daily interactions.

So this slide is just really to remind us or maybe to introduce some of us who might be a little newer to this arena.

what types of vocabulary do we wanna make sure on starter system? As much as we can, we really wanna make sure that we're using starter systems that kind of line up well with robust or high-tech AAC options that are currently available, because if we're thinking in the long term,

we know that this is a child who may very well need AAC solutions for at least their longish term, you know, beyond their preschool years into their school age.

We're not sure.

We don't have great crystal balls.

And so we wanna make sure that we're building toward that longer term perspective.

And so a high-tech solution is normally going to be the most effective tool for communicators at that part of their journey.

And so we're gonna try to base our starter system on what's already available to try to curb, you know, that learning demand that might otherwise happen if we were changing systems on a regular basis.

So I've included in your resources for today's talk places where you can go to get some printed or light-tech AAC options that are provided by some of our high-tech AAC companies.

That's one way to think about it.

And when we get to those resource slides, I'll talk a little bit more about it.

But at the very least, we know that we need to represent a wide range of vocabulary.

So when we're thinking about these routines and what the child is already communicating with their own signals, we wanna try to see how we can pull from all of these buckets.

The first bucket is probably one you've heard a lot if you've been awake for five minutes in the AAC space.

And that's general core.

And so core vocabulary, when you see people talking about core vocabulary, it's usually talking about general core and that's that high frequency, it's a small list of high frequency words that are incredibly versatile, because they can be taught and can be utilized across various routines.

Another piece of core that is not as readily talked about is personal core, however, and personal core includes nouns.

So a noun has often been a dirty word in the core space where it's like, well, we don't use nouns.

We only need core.

But that's actually not true.

And that's especially not true for very young emerging communicators, because as you know from typical development, many toddlers start out using nouns as their first words.

And those nouns are really meaningful to them.

They're nouns like people in their family, mama and dada.

Their favorite lovey, their favorite character, Elmo, these are all personal core.

So they can't be used necessarily across different environments or different contexts like the word go or more or finish, but they are core to that child's essential roles and routines in their life.

And so they become essential to that communicator and definitely need to be part of the starter system.

So in addition to general and personal core, we also need to include fringe.

Now sometimes we're gonna have to limit fringe, which has those less frequently used, very specific, usually noun-focused words.

We may have to limit them if we don't have a lot of room on our AAC tools or we may have to get kind of creative on how we're gonna represent fringe if we wanna prioritize core vocabulary on an AAC tool.

But it absolutely needs to be considered in the overall AAC system.

And then the last two bullets here are two sets of vocabulary where these other pieces fit within.

So personal core, general core, and fringe are all gonna fit into these two main categories of coverage versus developmental.

And before, as we talked about those features of a starter system, I emphasized how important it was for a feature of a starter system to at least cover right now.

What does that child need right now to communicate? And right now might be today and also like three to six months from now, right? And some timeframe that's in the near future.

But developmental vocabulary is gonna push that child's development further.

And so whenever possible, we also wanna think about including developmental opportunities. So we might wanna have vocabulary on a starter system that's just above what that child is currently motivated to express.

And I can give you one example.

You might have a lot of learners who are focusing on requesting right now.

That's a very emerging communication function.

And so coverage vocabulary would really narrow in on those requests.

However, children by the age of two and three years old are also sharing enjoyment, making comments and asking questions.

And so those are developmental functions that are well on the horizon for this learner and we may wanna have available on their AAC system so that we have a means of scaffolding them into those communication functions.

So those would be developmental vocabulary.

And then the last communication or, excuse me, the last consideration that I'm encouraging to make here is what about phrases? And we know through the literature and through practical advice in the AAC world that we want to focus a lot more on single word vocabulary for these starter systems.

But for some of our learners, phrases are really gonna be necessary.

So don't eliminate them altogether, but really think about some of the situations in which phrases could really be valuable to include in a starter system.

And a few that comes to mind are if we have students or learners who are physically challenged and getting to phrases that are used frequently is very labor-intensive for their body, we may wanna have some phrases in there, maybe greetings or maybe, can you help me? Or even phrases that help them engage in humor if that's something that they're motivated by such as a funny joke or a funny phrase from a cartoon that they wanna share with a preschool peer.

Another reason we might use phrases is for a child who has maybe sensory or health needs where they need to access that communication very quickly, right? So say a child that needs a break and if they don't get a break quickly, they are going to go into a dysregulated state, have a very overwhelming meltdown.

We may wanna put an I need a break phrase in their system rather than making them navigate to something single word for word.

So phrases can certainly be valuable.

I encourage you to think about where they fit in with your learners based on their profile. And one final thing I'll mention here is phrases can also be considered for gestalt language processors.

So again, we can't talk about that in this course, but if you're working with students who have more of a gestalt language processing strength, then phrases may very well find themselves into a starter system.

Right, I'm gonna check the Q&A again.

We've got another question here, couple.

Let's see here.

Oh, someone just asked what I talked, "Have you ever used phrases for gestalt language processing?" Yes, for what we know in the limited availability of research and practical evidence so far, we know that phrases can be very promising, focused language processors.

There's a lot of great consuming it out there on this topic and I encourage you to dive into it if you have some of these kids on your caseload.

All right, so we've got a couple more here.

How young is too young to use AAC? What developmental milestone should be present first above introducing AAC? Very good question.

Don, I'm gonna pin that question and try to get to it at the end.

We got another one here.

I start with X icons and I want versus strip...

I'm also gonna wait for that one for the end because Jason has quite a few follow-ups here.

So, John and Jason, I'm gonna pin your questions and get to them at the end.

All right, sorry that I just skimmed through all those slides too.

My roller ball mouse was moving where we shouldn't have been moving.

Okay, so we're talking about now, we've got kind of a loose plant.

We're thinking about means and functions.

We're taking a strengths-based approach of what is this child already communicating? Where is this family already thriving and their ability to recognize and interpret those signals.

And what are these meaningful, motivating, socially and emotionally charged interactions that are happening already that we can hopefully infuse some language with AAC within? We figured out we've got some core words, maybe, personal and general that we wanna involve in the program.

We might use a word map that we can help for each routine throughout the day, figure out what words could be most meaningful to layer onto those signals.

And we're thinking about some, you know, initial features we need to make sure we consider with learners, especially accessibility for learners who have vision and motor concerns.

We have to figure out also where to find these tools.

So I've included here in this slide some resources we can chat through and maybe explore if we have the time on how would you find some tools to get started? My very first suggestion at the first link here is just to adapt or create some light-tech tools.

So light or low-tech tools or anything printed such as a communication book or communication board.

For some of you, it may be a PEC system if that's something that you're using.

But light-tech is a fantastic place to start if you're a provider with limited access to high-tech tools at a center that doesn't have a lot of funding or doesn't have a lot of experience with what they should invest their funding in.

Light-tech is something that you can usually do today and have available in your library for your whole entire team to use and adapt as they need.

So if you click this link, what you'll get is a curated collection of resources that I have on the AACcessible website that are all principle and downloadable light-tech tools.

A lot of them are kind of a print and use it as it is type of tool.

So you'd have to get a little creative to adapt it for individualized needs or you can use it as a guide and create your own.

And so at this link, I've also created websites like lesson, or I've curated, rather, websites like lesson picks and other tools that you can use to create simple like tech boards based on some of these as models that are a little more tailored to the individual preferences of families and children that you serve.

In addition to light-tech tools, there's a whole lot of loan libraries available to many of us in our local area.

So link two is gonna send you to another curated collection of places where you could reach out and get some AT loan equipment.

There's also a directory on the AACcessible website included in that link that helps you search by state.

We've asked some loan libraries to reach out to us at AACcessible to tell us what they offer and to whom and who could qualify to get loans from their library.

And then we've included them in that directory.

So usually universities in your area may have a loan program attached to them.

Some school districts also partner with loan programs.

And then many of our AT vendors, including AbleNet, will offer loans, particular equipment to providers who are doing evaluations or who would like to trial some equipment with their families.

So I included as many that I can think of at that number two link of places that you could reach out to to hopefully get some loans going for that higher-tech appointment.

And then my number three suggestion is, and this is something I have personal experience with in the EI programs that I've been a part of and consulted with, is it's really beneficial for you to chat with your EI teams and investing in an AAC library for your center.

One of the things you can count on as an EI team is that you're going to have new children and families circulating through your program on a regular basis.

And odds are a significant portion of them may benefit from AAC tools and strategies.

So I've included here at this number three link just some resources that you might be able to use if you'd like to start building an assistive technology and AAC library for your center.

That should include light-tech principle tools as well that I've included on link number one, but it may also be things that your center provides and purchases that you own, that you can then provide to families to trial.

So I've included there some ways that you as an SLP may be able to get free or low-cost access to communication apps on hardware, like iPads that you may already have in your center.

I've also included on there some other ideas around how to link up with vendors who may be able to provide you evaluation equipment that you can keep on more of a longer term basis if you're a center that is hoping to build your AAC program.

And circling back to number one of that light-tech option, one of the things I've done as a consultant for many EI programs is provided them with access to a core toolbox of core communication boards and books and activity boards and books.

And so at that curated link, you'll find tons of printable resources that are kind of out of the box, as I said.

And sometimes that's a great place to start.

You might just, on an in-service day, or maybe have a fun Christmas holiday event with your team where everybody comes and volunteers some time to print and laminate some of those light-tech supports and just have them available so that everybody can have some in their car as they're going from visit to visit.

They can pull them out and use them in their generic form and then figure out how they wanna modify something like that for an individual's childhood family over time.

So if there's no harm in starting with something that's straight out of the box until you get a little bit more information about how you wanna work with the family to modify it.

All right, so as we round out, we're getting to our final point here of, okay, so I'm on board as a provider.

I know that I want AAC to be a part of my intervention support for these families and students, otherwise I wouldn't be here with this talk.

But I have a couple other, perhaps colleagues or families that are a little bit harder nuts to crack, right? They're still a little bit mystified by how this AAC stuff is actually going to fit in.

One of the questions in the Q&A box was how young is too young and what are the prerequisite skills? Those are two main myths that are still proliferating throughout the world.

And so it's a really important conversation to keep having, helping people feel more comfortable about the fact that these myths are actually not realities.

So I've included some resources for you in this regard as well, but I wanted to give you just some main strategies that I have found helpful when talking about AAC, especially with families, because likely families are not bringing a lot of background history or preconceived notions that colleagues may have, but they're bringing a lot of fear or a lot of uncertainty around whether or not this is a good approach to include in their child's program.

So the very first thing I suggest, of course, the cornerstone of EI, is you need to build a trusting relationship.

Try not to come out of the gate running with that AAC right after that first contact with the family and throw all that information at them, because they're likely not going to be able to receive it.

I would encourage you not to play a waiting game just for the sake of being apprehensive about having the conversation, but definitely make sure that you've had that trusting rapport before you start mentioning AAC to families.

I think it just really makes a difference for how that conversation will go, especially for families who are a little bit more on the fence or worried about how that fits into their plan.

Also busting myths, which I'm gonna show you a resource in a moment and maybe address one of the Q&A's regarding that.

The third bullet though I wanna jump to first is emphasizing the augmentative over the alternative.

So one of the main misconceptions about AAC is that it's only used when people don't speak. And that's actually not what it is.

If we think about AAC as a universal design or a bridge from abilities to goals, we really shouldn't think of it any differently than using other tools to achieve goals.

And that includes using tools for children who are speaking, but their speech is not meeting their everyday needs according to their desires and their family's priorities, but also developmental expectations.

So when I speak about AAC, I always like to emphasize how it can be a teaching tool.

It's not just a compensatory tool, it's a teaching tool.

And what is the role of that visual language in my overall support plan with that family and building that child's language, building their vocabulary, their receptive skills, their emotional regulation skills? So I like to look at it as kind of like a tool in that conversation, an augmentative tool.

I also think it's really helpful to draw connections between AAC and other forms of assistive technology.

So I think this is important to do in your own mind, but it's also important to do when you're helping others make connections with how AAC fits in.

So if you think about, for example, something like a wheelchair, the goal of intervention in early intervention is not necessarily focused on the wheelchair, but the wheelchair is a means of that child participating in other aspects of meaningful life.

So if you think about the connections then between AAC, then you emphasize the idea that AAC is that tool that helps participation in that aspect of meaningful life.

Sometimes it can help families really see how this is going to serve to add to the program rather than reorient the program.

Participation is always at the focus of what we're working on in early intervention and beyond.

And so making connections with more familiar forms of technology, even glasses or other supports that families may be more familiar with, can really help you navigate this conversation. We also wanna foster a mindset of competence.

And so speaking a little bit to the question in the question and answer box about when is too young and what prerequisite skills, we really wanna help our families understand that even their children with multiple disabilities who have very extensive support needs were capable of learning how to communicate and that it isn't really up to them to show us the readiness to do that, but it's up to us to facilitate their participation opportunities, that we would facilitate any child who is on the path of speaking more readily than the children that we're presented with. So I find in my coaching that sometimes the hardest stakeholders to convince that their child is competent and has the potential to communicate with what seems to be very daunting and confusing technology, some of those stakeholders that are most difficult to convince our parents.

And so I start a conversation very early of helping families realize all the things their child is already doing, all the ways in which they're already shown that they're ready and helping them make connections between what we offer in a typical developmental pattern that we wanna make sure we're also offering in this supported or aided developmental pattern.

So really helping families do that and helping other providers do that is very helpful. And then the last one here is being patient and gradual. And this is really about you as providers. It's very hard to invest yourself in the AAC process at first and realize that the return on investment is actually quite low for many students. And it isn't because it's not going to be a helpful strategy in the long term. It's usually because you are encountering them at a very early emerging stage in their communication journey. So it's possible that your role will not reap the benefits of all of that input that you've put on and you, you may not actually see the child even use the AAC system proficiently before they age out of your program. But knowing that that patient and gradual approach, you're planting that seed, you're really helping that family learn where AAC might fit in in their future and to advocate that moving forward and this can be very key parts of your role as a provider. So with that, we're done talking about specifics here of the strategies I wanted to offer, but I wanted to remind you there's links to resources all throughout your slides, including links to something called the stacks, which is here on bullet three. The stacks is that curated resource page that I talked to you about. It's completely free. You can access all of the links that I've put on there, including links about myth busting handouts you could share with families and colleagues, AT loan libraries that you could reach out to, printed light tech supports that you could create and adapt for your team. All of that can be located at the stacks. And then there may be some other resources that are linked throughout the presentation that are at other areas of this website, but I wanna make sure that you knew this part was here. And with that, before I get to the Q&A box again, I wanna remind you all that I'm giving another talk later this month. It'll be offered on demand as well. It kinda continues the conversation. It's really about, okay, I kinda know where I want my tools to start out. I've got some words, you know, I wanna put on there. How do I ring AAC into the home? And so this is gonna be a talk that's more geared on intervention and now that you've got a starter system, what are some of the strategies that you would use to bring that into the home and help families integrate that into their daily living routine? So I encourage you to join me live for that one or reach out and do the on-demand recording if you're not able to attend live. And I also wanna let everybody know in the audience that AACcessible, the organization that I am the director of, we offer an early intervention conference every year. We're on our third year. So if you're finding that this is a topic that's interesting to you and you want to dive deeper into some of the assessment and intervention topics, this is a free live event that we host every year. So every live conference is free to anybody who joins. And then we do also have some on-demand options available for purchase after the live event. So put that in your modified slides in case you're interested.



And then I linked a ton of resources that offer you some research and practical evidence to support the things that we discussed today.

With that, I'm gonna jump to the Q&A.

We didn't have time today to browse all the resources, but I encourage you to explore the stacks as I mentioned, because that is where everything I mentioned can be found.

Stop this and pull up my Q&A really quick.

All right, so to answer Don's question of how young is too young and what prerequisite milestones do we need? I wanna speak to that in two ways.

The first is it's never too young to start thinking about AAC.

However, how AAC looks is gonna differ based on the age and the stage that the child is at.

So what I would suggest if I was approaching this for the first time in my own mind is throw all the ideas about prerequisites out the window, because there is no prerequisites for providing an opportunity.

But if you have a student who is not yet demonstrating certain foundational social-emotional milestones, the way you integrate AAC into their program is gonna look very different.

So for example, if you have a pre-intentional communicator, a learner who's not showing you that they're really connecting communication acts with another person, they're not showing that they can communicate it with you for a specific purpose, your primary goal and intervention is to shape intention.

We're likely gonna do that through non-linguistic ways.

You're gonna do that by encouraging eye gaze, encouraging gestures, encouraging intentional vocalizations, anything that that child can do to make you as a partner do something that they want.

And that's gonna breed intention and it's gonna come a lot through that social connection with their caregiver.

And then an AAC may be available to model language just the same way that we would do with a pre-intentional infant, right? So a baby is pre-intentional before the age of about eight or nine months.

We're speaking to that baby all the while.

We're not expecting them to speak back.

We're probably not even expecting them to understand our words, but they're engaging with us and learning purposeful intention through that back and forth.

And we're always layering on that verbal language.

So in the same regard, AAC modeling is gonna layer on that verbal language.

And so the way that you do that and how many words are available will come through the assessment and the intervention trial process, but you're always gonna have an access to an opportunity for more advanced communication modeling through your AAC tools.

Hopefully that answers your question, Don.

If not, reach out to me.

We can continue the conversation offline.

And then Jason had a question here.

I'm just gonna get close to my screen so I can see it.

It says, "I start with PECS icons and I want Velcro strip and a choice line Velcro strip with two or more choices."

I encourage the child to place their choice on the I want strip and we read across the line and they receive what they ask for." So Jason, I'm not sure if you have a question paired with this. I'm gonna scroll down and see.

With parents or therapists, say kids are too young.

I know that parents, okay, so I don't think Jason has a question here.

I think he just has a comment.

Emily's got a question.

What would you share with families that say my son is happy with his current communication needs and is not showing frustration when he is not understood? I don't think he is ready.

That's a beautiful question, Emily, and I think it speaks a little bit to what I was just talking about.

David Beukelman, who is a pioneer in the field of AAC and a prominent expert still to this day, talks a lot about the importance of investing money in the bank, right? So the AAC investment that we make in the first three years of life when that child is very well meeting their needs without language, right? They are, and I wouldn't question that parent, but the investment we make is to set the stage for the future.

And so I would kind of use that analogy that we just discussed briefly about how we speak.

We never don't speak to an infant who is developing typically and who is likely going to be a speaker.

And so we wanna make sure that we're also thinking about how we speak in pictures to a learner that may in the future very well be a picture-based language user.

So I think that's a very watered down answer to your question that we could talk about at more at length.

But I think what we wanna help families understand is we're not really laying the groundwork for them to communicate right now as much as we're laying the groundwork for them to communicate later on in the future.

A second thing I would also consider in my conversations with families who have that comment is that we wanna make sure that they know that all of those ways in which that child is already communicating are AAC.

And so maybe the goal in that regard for a family who isn't ready to take the leap to picture-based AAC is making more robust use of those no-tech exchanges.

How do we help that child use their signals to communicate a wider range of functions, to take more terms in a conversation rather than just building their basic needs and meeting their basic needs? So reminding families that kids, very young kids, they communicate beyond basic needs. They tell stories, they share their ideas and interests.

They argue, they assert, and challenging that family to walk with you on that conversation.

Is your child able to do that without other ways of expressing those functions? And if not, maybe that's where AAC lives for that child.

Maybe their basic needs continue to be met with signals and their ability to story-tell and participate in arguments and other things that are meaningful, have a place in the AAC picture-based realm.

All right, we've got a couple more questions here.

Just a reminder, you're free to leave at the hour.

As long as you stay the full hour, you get your ASHA credit.

I will stay on and answer questions for a little bit longer for those who are interested.

All right, we say, let's see here, "How many people with established AAC devices continue to use their AAC?" That's a great question, Margaret.

I don't know the answer to it, but I can look into it and reach out to me if you still wanna keep the conversation going and I'll share what I find out.

Other question is, "Do you have a preference between photo and picture symbols when starting with your young AAC users?" I would say there is no hierarchy for symbols.

But remember, they need to be useful and feasible for that student.

And so any of your learners who have vision meets such as cortical visual impairment or other visual acuity problems, photos may very well be needed for vision reasons, not for cognitive reasons.

I also think photos can be really helpful for very personal vocabulary.

So for example, in a starter AAC system, I would definitely have the photograph of a child's mother and not a generic symbol of their mother if I wanted them to use that to ask for their mother.

But I may also have a generic symbol on a different page that is for the concept of mother, someone else's mother.

So there can be a case for using more of those generic, overall, catchall symbols versus more personalized photos, especially for great personal vocabulary.

Let's see here, "Do you know of any research that supports length of eye gaze with choice-making such as gazing in an object picture for two seconds?" I do not know of any research that's linking those concepts.

I'd love to know about it if you have some though, so feel free to reach out to me via email and we can keep the conversation going.

But I don't personally know of any research related to that.

All right, we've got another question here, "Eye gaze, how long loan for." I'm not sure what that question means.

Vinny, maybe you can add a little bit more information to your question and then I can help you with that.

All right, so with that, I think I've hit everything that I could understand in the Q&A box.

I'll go ahead and pause here, see if anybody else have any final questions before we end for today.

I thank you all so much for joining me.

I hope you'll consider joining for the second session later this month.

And please explore the resources we shared today.

And if you have any questions, don't hesitate to reach out to me over social media or email.