

- [Blair] With that,

I will turn it over to today's speaker.

- Thank you so much, Blair.

Thanks everybody for joining.

My name is Tanna Neufeld

and I'll be sharing the next  
hour with you as we walk

through this really special topic for me.

And on that note, it will  
be quite an authentic topic

as I am in my therapy  
room here where I work.

And so you may hear some beautiful voices

and different sounds  
coming from the room today.

And that is our wonderful  
kids that are surrounding us.

So I apologize if that's  
distracting, this was the luck

of the draw today for me

and where I needed to be certain times.

So you should have access to the slides.

However, there was a couple  
updates to these slides

that I shared with Blair and  
her team earlier this morning.

They were uploaded to the server,

but there may be a little bit

of a delay in getting you access.

So Blair popped the link  
into the chat for us

and you guys can access this  
PDF of the new updated slides.

And also there's a handout in there

that was not included  
in the original upload

that should be easily available to you  
in that Google drive as well.

So this is a two part series.

Today we're gonna really talk  
about connection concepts

and then we're gonna tie them in more  
to AAC implementation in part two.

So don't get disappointed if you're like,

I don't hear much about  
AAC in this presentation

by the end of it.

I'm really laying the groundwork for you

and I promise there will be  
direct AAC system strategies

available in part two,

but really want wanting to  
give you a nice foundation of

what are some of the unique challenges

and strengths that children  
on autism spectrum bring

to learning how to communicate with AAC.

I think you all have some  
information about who I am

and my disclosures.

If you'd like to contact me,

there's also some social media links

and email contact  
information here for you.

And I just wanna bring my  
perspective to the table

so you know where I'm coming from

as I share this information with you.

I am an SLP, our speech language pathologist by training.

I work exclusively

with children on the autism spectrum at the moment.

Although most of my career I've worked with a variety

of complex communicators in different settings,

including early intervention.

And so we'll be focusing on those particular learners

in our talk today, those who are on the autism spectrum

and who are in that early learner age group.

In addition to my SLP role, I am the founding director

of a nonprofit called Accessible.

And some of the resources I share with you today are

from that website and that bank of pools.

And then under that role and also just my role

as a clinician, I do travel around the country virtually

and also internationally to present different trainings

and consult with organizations

and school districts to help them build their capacity

and supporting communicators

like the ones we'll be talking about today.

But we'll keep an eye on  
the chat as much as I can.

I let Blair know at the start of the talk,

I am visually impaired, I am disabled.

I have a very hard time  
seeing on my laptop screen,

which is unfortunately

what I am presenting for you on today.

So I'm gonna do my best to be selfie

and ninja about checking the chat,

but Blair has promised  
to help me do that so

that we can hopefully make this  
as impactful and cooperative

and interactive as you'd like it to be.

So I think you've got your  
learning objectives here

as well on your handouts.

So I just wanna kind of  
breeze through what we hope

to accomplish in this first hour.

And again, making sure you understand

that there is a second  
hour that will pick up

where we left off here.

Today we're really just  
gonna focus on defining

and discussing those, what I've  
called connection concepts.

And we're gonna tackle three  
today, which is regulation,

relatedness, and engagement.

These concepts are really  
coming from my background

in the DIR model or the  
developmental individual differences  
relationship-based intervention model.

Although I am not a DIR trainer,  
I incorporate DIR principles a lot  
in my practice with young learners.

And so a lot of those  
pieces are gonna be brought  
into the talk today.

And much of the resources and references  
and books that I have at the  
end of the slides for you

to consider checking out  
are are also pulling on some

of those developmentally  
anchored, you know,

relationship-based interventions

that really respect children's  
individual differences

and can inform us as partners of

how we can adjust our interaction styles

and our environments to best  
support the relationship

and the activity

and the skill building that we  
wanna do for these learners.

And we're gonna tackle those.

We're also gonna identify  
at least two ways

in which us as SLPs,

I assume are other AAC providers,

can really identify each of  
these connection concepts

that might be present in our learners,

exploring some of the  
challenges that they may pose

to our AAC intervention programming.

And then we're gonna  
also identify some ways

to enhance our understanding,

not only of those regulation needs,

which are really prominent  
in these learners,

but also their engagement needs.

And then we'll pick up in part  
two at kind of that point of,

all right, we've discussed  
some of the challenges,

we've discussed some of the strengths,

we also have us discussed some strategies

on identifying some of these needs

that we may overlook in  
traditional AAC intervention.

Part two will help us pick up  
where we left off with that

and figuring out, well, what  
does AAC really look like

in these particular stages,  
specifically intervention,

not necessarily assessment.

So our time order agenda as you had,

I'm gonna be spinning  
you guys through there,

sorry about that.

But to the time order agenda,  
we're gonna start out,

of course, we just said our introduction.

We're gonna start out talking

about those connection concepts

and we'll have a little  
bit of time at the end

for question and answer,  
but the bulk of our time,

we're really gonna spend

hashing out these connection concepts

and really thinking of it as a framework

to better AAC intervention.

So the very first thing I really like

to think about is getting  
my mindset as a provider

in the place that I  
think is most productive

and supportive for  
these types of learners.

And you may have heard this  
before in other talks as well,

but really AAC is our bridge

that we're using in  
intervention of course to help

that learner scaffold from

where they are in their  
communication development

to those higher level, more  
complex ways of communicating.

And when we think about  
building some more complex ways

of communicating, we really wanna expand

on that learner's current system, right?

Many of these learners have a lot of ways

that they can effectively  
communicate and we honor those

and we respect those

and respond to those in a way  
that builds the relationship

and keeps the interaction going.

But we're always trying to shape

and model more conventional  
ways for these learners

to communicate so that they  
can get their needs met,

of course, but more importantly,

so that they can learn more enriched ways

of expressing the full  
range of their ideas,

which can be hard to do with gestures.

You can only maybe get  
a little bit of the idea

through a gesture and some  
affect and emotional display,

and using those symbols  
can really be a helpful way

to expand on that idea.

So I think when I think  
about AAC as a bridge,

I also think about some  
of the common challenges

that I've encountered with colleagues

and others that I mentor

and partner with about how some

of our learners on the spectrum  
may not respond as we expect

or as we had hoped to some  
of our AAC approaches.

And so some of the challenges  
I've had people share with me

or things like, you know,  
my student doesn't look



at the pictures when I point to them,

or my student is not isolating  
their own finger to point

and so I'm feeling like they  
may not be ready for AAC.

A big one that comes up a lot  
is the student is just kind

of exploring the device.

You may use hear words  
like stim being used

when people are  
encountering this challenge,

but really what I see  
it as is that student

or that young child really exploring

or babbling on their device.

And so I bet some of you have  
some challenges on your mind.

I'd like to open the  
chat for our first kind

of participation prompt here

and get a sense of what  
are some of the challenges

that you've encountered  
when you're working

with young learners on  
the autism spectrum.

I'm gonna check the chat.

Classroom teacher buy-in.

That's a good one.

Not attending.

I knew, I was telling Blair  
the that's gonna blow up

with 200 people in the room

and I'm not gonna be able  
to track all of them,

but I see a lot of them popping through,  
limited interest, stimming on the device,  
not looking at the pictures.

Yeah, so you all are  
kind of echoing into some  
of the challenges I mentioned,  
but in your own individualized  
experiences, right?

And so I think the big  
themes that I usually here

and I'm seeing in your share  
is that visual attention

or join attention on the ACC  
system is a big, big challenge.

Restricted interest, I've  
heard a lot of people say,

well this learner doesn't seem  
to be interested in anything.

And we know that that's not true,

but it can be very  
difficult for us as partners

and parents that we partner  
with to identify activities

that we can join in on  
that lend themselves well

to engaging and interacting  
with the young child.

And also bringing that AAC device in  
which is a third point of attention  
that really is quite a challenge.

It's quite a demand to be able

to shift attention in  
those different domains,

in those different areas.

Thank you so much

for contributing your  
challenges to the chat.

I'm sure it'll be reassuring  
to others to see that

they're not alone in experiencing  
some of these challenges.

And I think that hopefully by today,

by the end of today's class,

you'll have just a few other ways

to consider those challenges

and what might be  
influencing those challenges.

But I think I wanna wrap up the slide

by talking about this  
AAC building a bridge.

And we know that AAC is a bridge

to communication, to language.

That's really what we hope,  
at least when we think

about symbol based AAC.

We know that there are other modes

of communication under the  
AAC umbrella including gesture

and gaze and body language  
that are not symbol based.

And we're thinking about those as well.

But when we think about that  
more traditional definition

or more consumer ready  
idea of what AAC is,

we're usually thinking  
about picture based symbols

and we know that they help  
us bridge to language.

But really underneath that  
bridge, the foundation

that really holds that  
bridge up is connection.

And connection really is gonna be tied  
to the social/emotional development  
and social/emotional relationships that  
that learner is operating within.

When we think about connection,  
supporting that bridge,

really when we think also

when that relationship to  
the challenges we experience,

when the elements of social  
connection are challenging

for learners

or for us as partners to  
discern in our learners,

then what we usually find is that a lot  
of the areas we're talking about  
in your challenges were impacted.

So we can do things really  
showing off in things like

limited attention to the  
models that we provide were

becoming dysregulated even  
by the presence of AAC

and the fact that someone  
else is talking with us

with this technology.

So our connection concepts  
then, you can see them outlined

and briefly described here on the screen.

We're gonna go through each one of them individually, but I think it really is difficult to talk about them in isolation because they are pretty interconnected and interrelated in nature and in neurotypical development and neurodivergent development, we are just as integrated in both of those types of children.

And so the first one at the top here is regulation of course, and that's a big one for many of our learners on the autism spectrum.

It is usually something that as SLPs we don't usually get trained in how to identify or support regulation.

And so I'm hoping that with a little bit of the information that we share today, it's really gonna arm you with more of a platform to collaborate with your experts and your team in regulation.

So nothing we say today is gonna make any of us an expert in regulation.

And of course every child's needs profile are different.

But I'm hopeful that if we can think about the role

of regulation in AAC intervention, it gives us a platform

to collaborate with our  
occupational therapists

and others on our team that  
may be more experienced

and well-versed in that realm.

So as we said before,

language development occurs  
on a solid foundation

of functional social emotional skills.

And this is where I'm  
pulling in that DIR model,

the work of Dr. Stanley  
Greenspan and Stuart Shanker,

who developed the functional  
emotional developmental model.

This is the theory that  
the DIR model was built on

and it really guides us

through thinking about  
social emotional development

across nine different capacities.

We're really only focusing today

on the first three  
capacities in that hierarchy,

but I just wanna make  
sure that you understand

where it's coming from.

So if you wanna learn more about it

and how children are moved  
through with our support

in that hierarchy, it's  
not really a hierarchy,

it's actually kind of  
an integrated continuum.

You can certainly go to some

of the resources I provided for you.

I think that one of the biggest pieces  
that was an aha moment for me as an SLP,  
rather recently, within the last, I'd say,  
five to eight years,  
is that language really doesn't  
exist apart from emotion.

And that's kind of an underlying framework  
in the functional emotional  
developmental model.

And I don't know if anyone in the room  
has read *The First Idea*,  
which is a book written  
by Greenspan and Shanker.

It really outlines the theory  
of how we as human beings  
have evolved to be social creatures,  
that it's actually  
paramount to our survival.

But in so being,  
with our fetal brains being  
underdeveloped at birth,  
we're wired to really be in  
relationship with one another.

And that the simple formation  
that occurs as we start

to develop more complex  
reflective thinking

and eventually use  
language really does stem,

at its heart, from the root of our emotion

and that our emotion drives our intention.

So then under that platform,  
we're thinking here

about regulation being  
that readiness to engage,

to relate and to learn.

And of course then the opposite of that

would be bliss regulation,

but they're really not  
that black and white.

And regulation doesn't  
always look like calm.

Sometimes regulation  
needs to meet the energy

of the task at hand and  
the interaction at hand.

I don't know how many of  
you have seen the new book

that's being advertised by  
the folks at Autism Level Up.

It's called Energy.

I'm really excited to read it.

I haven't gotten it yet, but  
it talks a lot to this idea

of regulated doesn't always mean calm

and dysregulated doesn't  
always mean aggressive, right?

But there is a continuum  
on both of these poles

that we really need to bring  
the level of energy to the task

and the interaction, helps  
us be ready to engage

and to learn from one another.

Engagement, of course,  
is read from that piece,

that standpoint of regulation.

And here we're really just



talking about the interaction

with people and activities.

And so when we don't see engagement,

we might think the  
opposite is disengagement.

But again, there is quite a spectrum.

And our learners on the  
spectrum may actually

show different ways of engaging with us

in interactions depending on  
what we're doing together.

And they may show ways of engaging

that are not very conventional,

meaning we may not see them  
in neurotypical children

and it may require more detective work

from us to spot them.

And then the third one  
here is relatedness.

And really that's the desire

and preference for social interaction.

And really when we talk about relatedness,

we're gonna talk about our  
responsibility as partners

to help foster relatedness.

Really we know this is  
built upon a foundation

of the other two connection concepts,

regulation and engagement.

And that many of our learners  
are wired for connection

and wired for relationship,

but it can be difficult

depending on their individual differences,  
to really access the people around them  
in a way that is safe  
and comfortable for them.

It's motivating for them.

And so it does leave us to be pressed  
and trying to figure that out.

So we're gonna start off now  
with talking about this regulation piece  
in a little bit more detail.

And so dysregulation is  
probably at the heart of many

of the challenges I've  
experienced in working

with young learners on the autism spectrum  
who are emerging in their  
communication development.

Really when I think about dysregulation,

I think about disorganized  
responses to the sensations

and experiences that are either  
going on inside of the body

or outside of the body.

I'm sure you all know we  
experience these as people,

we all experience dysregulation

and they're brought on by our  
own individual differences,

which is a big hallmark in the DIR model.

So really then dysregulation  
is an experience

in the mind and the body.

If you think about some of the

things that dysregulate you,  
I'd like to take a a breather here  
and just kind of pop back over the chat  
and challenge you guys to maybe share  
what's something that dysregulates you?

Just pop one word into the chat.

Let's see if we can  
highlight some of the noise.

You guys jinx, both noise.

Sleep or lack of sleep,

grocery shopping,

noise, noise, noise,

lights, look at that,

hunger, loud chewing,  
stress, family conflict.

Amazing, look at all these triggers.

Now let's shift,

for those who already  
had a chance to share,

how do you know you're dysregulated?

You get annoyed, you're  
angry, you're irritable,

you're aggravated, you're unable to focus.

Breath shut down, you hold your breath,

you can't focus easily and  
you gotta fast heart rate.

Amazing, yeah.

So you're really highlighting here all

of the everyday pieces of life

that can dysregulate all of us.

And of course we're all

bringing different  
neurology to this question.

We bring different neurology to every day  
and sometimes to different moments, right?

But you're also highlighting

that dysregulation is really  
a mind/body experience.

We know that many of our learners,

I'm assuming if they could tell us

what they were experiencing,  
would be able to highlight some

of those sensations in the mind

and body that are really making  
it hard for them to do many

of the things that you all just described.

So when you're dysregulated,  
as you all said,

you may find it hard to focus

or to do what's required of  
you for a certain class, right?

Think about all that's required  
of you when you're learning

how to use AAC.

I know as a partner when  
I'm dysregulated, my ability

to navigate AAC certainly  
does deteriorate no matter

how familiar I am.

There's also a level

of panic I think in many of  
us when we're dysregulated,

especially if we know  
that we're dysregulated,

and we are in a situation  
that's really demanding

that we not be dysregulated, right?

Something that is demanding  
that we focus or engage

or be empathic and we're really  
having a hard time bringing

that to the table.

And that panic and anxiety  
really can come in addition,

on top of our dysregulation

because we know we're  
just not meeting the needs

of the situation.

So I think really, this  
concept really optimizes

or emphasizes rather,

that every person has these challenges,

but also within those  
individual differences,

those same individual differences

that can cause dysregulation  
for us and for our learners,

there are also strengths, right?

And so I think as we think  
in our part two about

how we can take regulation  
at the heart of our work

and figure out how to flex and adapt,

to build on the challenges  
or to build on the strengths

that our learners bring in  
their individual differences,

those same strengths,

but might actually cause  
dysregulation in certain moments.

But also to be sensitive  
and understand how to respond sensitively  
to those dysregulated moments  
when those individual differences  
are causing some of that  
for our learners.

So I did give you all a resource  
that I think would be  
helpful as a thought exercise  
as you're working with your learners  
and thinking about dysregulation,  
As I said, OTs are my favorite to go to  
for support with this.

There are other professionals on your team  
that may also bring a sounding board  
for you to help you reflect  
on why your learner might be dysregulated.

It is in your handout,  
it's called A Guide to  
Reflecting on Dysregulation,  
checklist kind of thing.

And it's not exhausted by any means,  
but it might just give you a framework  
for thinking about your particular learner  
and what might be contributing to some  
of that dysregulation.

I also, before I leave this  
slide, wanna highlight,  
you know, what is dysregulation?  
What could it look like, right?  
Sometimes we recognize

that it's dysregulation,

but if that's not our background,

we might actually not  
recognize it as that.

And so I put some quotes  
here on the slide.

Dysregulation might look like behavior

or challenging behavior, right?

It might look like non-compliance,

might even be seen as  
non-compliance in the charts

or files that you're  
reading for your learners.

Could also be seen as  
hyperactivity or inattention,

non-responsiveness or disengagement.

So I'm hoping that that  
checklist along with

what you've learned in your experience

and what you can use in  
your teaming with your OTs,

might be able to help  
you dig a little deeper

under the iceberg of that behavior.

I also wanna mention here

that dysregulation can be up or down.

And this is a big piece of  
what I see in our learners

who might look unresponsive

or uninterested in what we're doing.

So there may not be the  
learner that shows maybe

what our predisposed idea  
of dysregulation is, right,

that upregulation.

Maybe someone who is a  
little lower threshold

or who might be shutting down

because of their dysregulation,

and so their evidence

and the signs they're showing us

may not look like an upregulation, right?

They're gonna look more  
like a downregulation.

So you'll notice that that  
checklist really helps you walk

through both sides of that coin.

And then, you know, as you think about

again, why this dysregulation  
may be happening,

I think that checklist would be helpful.

But I think the most important  
takeaway I like to give is

that the behavior we observe, right,

is just the tip of the iceberg.

Sometimes it can seem one way

and it's actually seven other  
ways under the surface, right?

And there may be several  
factors under the surface

that we are not even considering.

And we might say, Well, how  
was I supposed to know that?

I had no idea what happened at home.

Or I had no idea that he just got

through some tummy trouble  
or had a dental procedure.



And so you'll see that part of  
that checklist really encourages us  
to dig a little bit deeper into areas  
of dysregulation that  
might not be immediate  
in our environment, right?

Triggers that might not be  
immediate in our environment,  
it could be internal to the learner  
or they could be  
historical to the learner.

Alright, I think we've kind of  
answered this pause to reflect,  
which is, you know, how does dysregulation  
hinder AAC support that  
you are trying to provide?

I think that many of you  
highlighted challenges earlier  
that would probably fall  
under this umbrella.

But I'll just pause for a minute  
and see, does anybody else have ideas on  
where you see dysregulation coming in  
and acting as a barrier to your efforts  
to help your learners with AAC?

I see we had some who  
are not finding the list,  
and it should be in that  
Google drive as a PDF.

Making connections, not able to focus,  
shutting down, no joint attention.

Yeah, so I think that  
you're emphasizing here

that if we have inattention,  
if we have minimal joint attention,  
if we have limited interests,  
definitely going to regulation first.

And I think for some of you that may seem  
like a very simple obvious thing,  
but I work with a lot of colleagues that  
that's not the first  
thing they think about.

I think sometimes when  
a child is not looking  
at AAC models not interacting  
with an AAC device,  
not finding interest in activities,  
some may go to cognitive  
assumptions, right?

I just left the training actually  
where I was having a lot of  
hard discussions with the team  
around how limited our  
cognitive testing is  
and how it really is difficult for us  
to understand the full picture of  
what our learners are thinking  
and what they're capable of thinking  
and what they're capable of  
putting together in their mind.

And so I really like to go  
to dysregulation over  
cognitive assumptions  
because honestly I don't  
feel like I have a good grasp  
on the cognitive level of many

of the learners that I support.

I just don't understand it well enough.

And so it's not the least  
dangerous assumption for me,

but I do feel like I have a  
tangible grasp on being able

to work through dysregulation  
with my learners

and so I like to start there.

You guys have a lot of  
great connections here.

Unsure of expectations,

communication partners  
gets get dysregulated

by the kiddos dysregulation.

That is spot on, what a great observation.

And we'll talk about in part two

how regulating ourselves  
is such an important part

of helping our students  
and our learners regulate.

Pushing the AAC away during  
hyperfocused activities.

Yeah, when they may be  
self-absorbed in their play

and not wanting the AAC  
device to be around.

Absolutely.

Thank you all for participating  
and giving these observations.

So I think that in  
addition to that checklist

that I provided,

I think there's some great  
strategies to help us

to add to our understanding  
the regulation needs

of the young children that we support.

Obviously at the top of the list is team.

We really need to use people  
who know this learner best

and at the top of that  
ladder is the family.

And so luckily for early  
intervention providers,

we've got ready access most  
of the time to families

to really help you wonder  
out loud together about

what might be going on here?

Why might he be showing this behavior

or this regulation right now?

What kind of caused it or  
what could be going on?

Of course our occupational  
therapist is our go-to

as well for sensory support.

And then of course we've got mental

and behavioral health  
professionals that may be able

to help tease this out with us.

And our educational teams.

Many of our educators

and instructional aides  
are spending a lot of time,

for example, with  
preschoolers during the day

and maybe another source of support.

All right, but we also wanna watch

for our learner in the moment  
to show us some examples

or some evidence rather,  
or some dysregulation.

For example, we wanna  
watch for gaze shifts

and gaze cuts, movement behaviors,  
really start to learn

how this child's body  
language is giving us insight

into where their mental state is going  
or their bodily stage is going.

As we watch our observations,

similar to what one of our  
attendees just contributed

in the chat, we really need  
to check our observations

and how they relate to the  
impacts of what we're doing

as a partner, right?

So do I notice differences  
rather in the behavior

of this child that indicate dysregulation

when I change my affect?

Affect being of course  
the way I move my body,

the tone, the rhythm, the pace,  
the volume, the intensity,

but also how I use my  
voice, how I use materials.

The right brain is constantly  
trying to pick up signals

of safety from these types  
of non-linguistic cues.

They also wanna see when I use language,

whether it's just my spoken  
language or my aided language

or both, how does that  
impact this child's behavior?

Also that I can use that as clues  
into what might be upregulating  
or downregulating our interaction.

I find video is a really  
helpful tool in this regard.

Sometimes it can be okay in the moment  
to try to be a detective and figure out,  
but really you're trying to keep you  
and your learner safe if they're  
upregulated, specifically.

And so it may be more difficult for you  
to be reflective in those  
moments, but going back

and watching a quick video clip,  
partnering with families  
who may have videos

of particularly dysregulated moments,  
can be a helpful tool to go back  
and do some of this detective work.

And then as we're interviewing  
and we're observing,

we really need to wonder out loud again,  
thinking about those factors  
that may be underneath the surface,

those factors that may be  
contributing to dysregulation

so that we can develop those adaptations

and those practices that  
we'll talk about in part two,

make adjustments

and hopefully let that learner  
feel safe and feel joyful,

but also help us target our goals.

Alright, we're gonna  
move now to engagement.

We can't be engaged when  
we're not regulated.

Regulation is a  
requirement for engagement.

And so if you are finding  
that you're in a situation

with your young learners  
where they are dysregulated,

then really that is gonna  
be your number one focus.

And we'll talk a lot  
about that in part two

of What is My Connection Focus  
with a Dysregulated Learner.

It really isn't to they engage  
them in a toy or an activity

or even a social routine.

It is to help them regulate.

But thinking about engagement  
then again, interaction

with people and activities  
is what we're going for.

We know that this is a precursor  
to setting up opportunities

to practice and learn  
joint attention skills.

And so when we don't see full engagement,

see like lowered engagement,

but sometimes I think  
the biggest struggle is

what we perceive as disengagement, right?

And that's really limited

or no interaction with the  
people, with the activities

that are going on in the learning space.

Disengagement might  
look like dysregulation

in a lot of ways, right?

So the signs that the child is disengaged  
may look a lot like those signs  
that they were dysregulated.

And I put those back up here on the slide  
for us to consider.

But it may also present  
as some self-absorption.

So sometimes we know our learners  
on the spectrum might actually go  
into self-absorbed play when  
they are trying to regulate.

Or they may be quite regulated

and this is them engaging  
in an activity in a way

that is familiar to them,  
that is motivating to them,

that is joyful to them.

And so regulation may not  
be at the heart there.

It may really just be finding  
out how myself as a partner

can join in on that joy

without causing dysregulation, right?

So disengagement can happen  
because of many barriers.



I've included another slide coming up here  
that we'll talk about in more detail.

I think one of them of  
course is dysregulation.

If I am not feeling safe

and not feeling regulated, I  
am not going to be able to engage.

I just cannot bring  
those tools to the table

for a particular moment.

Will go into the barriers.

Let's go into some of  
the signs of engagement

and some different types of engagement

that we might be looking for.

Really, emotional engagement  
is I think what I look for most

and what I anchor to most  
in the early learning space.

And that's really referring to

that learner's feelings  
about me as a partner,

about the environment  
that we're in together,

about the materials that  
we're using together, right?

Does this learner feel like they're safe?

Do they feel like they belong?

Do they feel valued and heard

and validated in our  
interactions together?

That's emotional engagement.

We've also got some  
other types of engagement

that I really don't think are coming much  
into our talk for these young learners.

So I'm gonna skip through them.

But they would be things  
like behavioral engagements

and cognitive engagements.

I think that when we're  
dealing with children

who are emerging in their  
social/emotional development

and emerging in their  
creative development,

I really wanna focus my energy use  
on establishing emotional engagement.

And how I know that my  
learner is emotionally engaged

is gonna be their unique ways, right,

of expressing that to me,  
mostly through positive affect.

So positive affect is a big, big cue

that they are feeling like they're

in a trusting relationship  
with me as a partner.

And that perhaps their peers around,

that they're feeling  
they enjoy being around

and feel relatively safe around.

They're also gonna take  
that positive affect

and they're gonna track  
instructional interactions, right?

So if this really looks like  
in our AAC space, a learner

that is giving us some gaze

reference once in a while

or showing us in their own way such

as fighting their movements,  
making facial expressions,

making particular vocalizations

or movements that let us  
know they're attending to us,

right?

So with that positive affect

and those signs of tracking,

that's how we're going  
to really notice whether

or not our learner is engaged emotionally.

So then we've got some barriers

and again, not an exhaustive list,

but just some things that  
I've encountered in my work

that I think are worthy

of consideration when we have  
a learner who is not engaged.

On the very left hand side,

you see anybody would be disengaged

because of these reasons, right?

And these are things like,  
this is a bored, right,

a boring activity, I'm  
disinterested in it,

or this activity is not new enough for me,

it's too familiar.

Or perhaps this activity  
is irrelevant or ingenuine.

And this is where we can  
see some of the activities

that we may be tempted to  
do, like withhold materials

to ask learners to request  
on their AAC device.

It's a very good example of an irrelevant  
or ingenuine activity.

Sometimes activities are too passive  
and that can cause disengagement, right?

So for example, if we've got  
a learner who loves books

but we're only reading the book

and not providing good opportunities

for dialogic strategies, then  
that learner might view that

as a passive activity

and may not engage in  
the way we want them to.

Or maybe get confused.

I think as somebody mentioned in the chat,

confused as to what's  
expected of this activity,

what is my role to play?

Maybe I don't understand the language,

maybe I don't understand the routine.

Or maybe there's a mismatch in the way

that my partner is interacting with me.

They're not reading my cues,

they're not reading my emotions,  
they're responding in ways

that are confusing to me and  
maybe even dysregulating.

And then on the flip  
side, on the other column,

you can see that there are all of these  
that may come up for our young learners  
on the autism spectrum.

But we also may have some  
individual differences popping in  
for these learners that are in addition  
to these potential barriers.

For example,

that the activities are  
too high developmentally.

We're asking that  
learner to play something

or do something with us

that really is requiring  
more developmental skills

and things like fine motor

and gross motor, sensor processing

than they have to bring to the table.

Or perhaps it's too low.

This learner

needs a little bit more  
challenge developmentally

and they need to be pushed  
to think a little bit more

in sequence instead of linear  
cause effect for example.

Kind of hinging on that too,

maybe the activity is  
inaccessible with our learners

who have vision differences

and fine motor differences,  
gross motor differences,

body awareness differences,

the activity may not  
be accessible to them.

Maybe the noise is too loud,  
maybe the pieces are too small.

Maybe that learner can't motor  
plan in order to figure out

how to engage in that activity,  
even if it's just using their own page  
to do a finger play with you.

So that may be disengaging for them.

So that list is just to kind of spearhead,

we'll talk through some of  
these in part two as we talk

through strategies as well.

So I think I'm gonna skip  
this reflection pause

because I think it ties into a lot of  
what you have all shared.

So when we see disengagement  
and when we know firsthand that

that is really interfering with  
our AAC intervention in many

of the ways we've discussed,  
visual tension is limited,

perhaps interests and actually wanting

to join in the activity with  
you or with parent is hindered.

We do have some strategies  
similar to those that we use

for our dysregulation checklist, right?

So again, the questions  
might be different,

the things we're wondering out loud

might be a little different,

but the strategies are very similar,  
especially if that learner is regulated  
and not engaged, right?

So if they're dysregulated,  
our energy again is going  
into figuring out the regulation piece.

But if they seem to be regulated  
when they're not engaged

in the learning experience,  
then we really want

to use those same strategies to figure out

how we can do some detective  
work around engagement.

So I think here is where I  
really love to use motivation

and joy surveys.

So I have one on the accessible website.

I didn't pull it in for today's talk.

I think they shared it  
in a prior talk I did

with ableU though.

And it really is just  
getting us with the family

and others that are familiar  
on the team thinking about

what brings this learner joy, right?

If I can't find anything  
that they're interested

that I've decided to  
bring into my encounter,

then how do I use this, you know,

multisensory profile checklist  
to try to get creative

and think outside of the box.

And really I think the best  
place to start with learners

that are entirely disengaged with us is

to probably remove objects, remove toys,

and focus on sensory and social routines

and join action routines

that are really focusing on two people

or three people in an interaction

and really capitalizing on  
those sensory modalities

that are learners are  
finding most pleasurable.

But some of our learners love songs.

Some of them hate them, right?

Some of them love movement  
and others are scared.

But I think that's one of our checklist,

which I'm, I'm happy to share  
later, after today's talk,

if you all can't find.

It might be an interesting  
tool to bring to a conversation

with a family when you're  
trying to tease out some

of those interests.

I also think once we know  
interests, we do really need

to observe again, how do  
we as partners contribute

and hinder this child's engagement?

For example, I've had kids  
who will slap me in the face

when I start to sing gently.



They'll do it very gently.

It's a very kind

and sincere way of telling me,

When you sing, you take away  
from this activity, right?

Maybe you dysregulate me,

but at the very least I know you take away

from this activity with me.

I also have noticed

that when I intentionally add  
some variation to my routines

with learners to set up  
some opportunities for them

to show me lessons, that's  
a really great place

to learn strategies to  
keep them engaged, right?

So if you've got a learner  
in one of those sensory

and social routines where  
you're perhaps pushing them

in a swing, for example, right?

It's very simple to keep  
going in a very similar way.

We make this swing stop,  
we make this swing go,

but adding some variation  
to the way you swing, right?

Thinking about those affect properties of

how we swing, the intensity, right?

The rhythm, the volume  
of the swinging, right?

How are we gonna do it?

Are we gonna do it side to side

and see how that learner responds,

and do they engage in smile?

Is that a gleam in the eye  
that I can take advantage of

and then have a word  
perhaps that I can model

that's related to that new process?

Okay, so we walk through a regulation,

we walk through engagement,

we're gonna end here with relatedness.

And really, you know,  
relatedness happens between child

and caregiver first and foremost, right?

So we know within early childhood

and infancy development,

relatedness happens through those attuned,

secure interactions between  
child and caregiver.

And that is likely still  
going on for young learners

that you're working with in  
the early intervention space.

But you also have a role as a  
partner who is not a parent,

who is an educator or an  
SLP or an OT or anyone else,

to build relatedness with these learners.

Build that desire and  
that preference, right?

Make yourself an extension  
of of the child's joy

by building a trusting relationship.

And so we have to build this over time.

It doesn't usually happen in one section.

We really need to think about all

of our connection concepts,

think about regulation  
and engagement because,

and I think we'll have  
it in the next slide.

These are really in the formula

for building that relatedness.

So I'm actually gonna pop  
over to that slide as we chat

so you have a visual while I'm talking.

But you know, just  
speaking from the infant

and early childhood space, which  
is really giving me volumes

of new things to consider as an SLP,

things that I was never taught in school,

things that I had to learn the hard way

in my clinical experience

and are now being magnified  
in the new learning

that I'm doing by being a  
little more transdisciplinary

in my research and in my practice.

But you know, relatedness  
builds in the early years

with attunement, right?

When I attune,

I recognize the emotional  
state of that child.

When I match my affect to that state,

I'll help collate,  
regulate with my affect.

I bring warmth and  
responsiveness and consistency

and reliability to our interaction.

And I bring out all of  
those things in hope

of supporting regulation

and engagement so that  
I have that foundation

to start teaching different  
ways of communicating.

So as you can see here on the slide,

a formula that I've kind  
of thought of in terms of

what relatedness is, is really, you know,

regulation plus engagement  
times time, right?

Children usually form the strongest bonds

with their therapists and  
educators when they feel that

that person gets them

and can help them regulate  
when they are feeling unsafe

or feeling disorganized

and also engages them in joyful activities

that are socially rewarding.

So I'm interested

'cause this is probably  
something that you all do,

you establish rapport,  
we're taught that in school,

but how do you see  
relatedness either helping

or hindering your AAC  
support with your learners?

I'm gonna pop back over to the chat

because I'm talking, we're  
way longer than I care to.

We've got about ten-ish minutes left.

And when we think about  
relatedness, think of in terms of

what are you seeing in  
terms of the relationship

between young learners  
and their caregivers,

for example?

Who may be contributing to AAC success

or hindering AAC progress.

Or maybe it's with you,

the relationship that you  
have with a particular learner

that you are kind of making guesses

and deducing that either  
the relationship is strong

or the relationship is a little shaky

based on some of the behaviors

or signs that that learner are  
showing when you're together.

That maybe that you need more time,

you need more rapport.

The better the relationship,  
the better more AACs.

Yeah Samantha, that's what  
I have observed as well.

Vulnerability required for  
learning and making mistakes.

Absolutely.

These are soft skills, right?

And they're things we don't

often measure in our objectives.

They're not always  
things that we talk about

in the AAC space.

I feel like sometimes they're  
operating under the surface

for many of us and because  
they're more of an art, right?

Developing relationship  
is a lot like an art

and it is hard to teach,  
but it's not impossible.

These elements of attunement

and being reflective with our learners

can be at the surface.

They can be explicit and conscious for us.

We can actually try to improve on them

and in turn improve our relationship.

But there is also much of  
it operating unconsciously.

And so that's where  
some reflective practice

with ourselves, Introspectively,

and also with our colleagues

when we have a particularly  
challenging learning situation

or when we have one

that's just really glowing for us, right?

Reflect on those high moments

and those strong relationships.

What's making them strong?

What's making that AAC connection strong?

How do I carry in that learning

through reflecting on the thoughts

and feelings that I'm having  
about that particular student

or this other situation

where I'm feeling a little less organized

and a little less positive

and a little less productive

in that space with this different student.

So with that, I left what  
I promised, questions.

We have tenish minutes.

I wanna let everybody  
know that the second part

of this talk is live in two weeks.

Oh, my watch is talking to me. Sorry.

And again, we'll dive in more, okay,

we've got these concepts, we're trying

to identify dysregulation, disengagement,

and identify some ways  
we can team with partners

in order to better understand  
the learner's needs.

We're gonna flip it over

and start talking about, okay,

well how do we adapt and support

and what does AAC look like  
at these different stages?

I did include a slide here

with some links to some  
accessible resources.

We've got different tools,  
many of them are free,

some of them are low cost.

If there's any sort of cost barrier to you

for any resource on our  
website, please reach out to me.

We don't want cost to be a reason

why you can't access something.

And then there's some books

that I didn't mention  
explicitly in the references

that I think are super powerful additions,

but they're non SLP books.

I think are just really,

they've been so beneficial in helping me

become more transdisciplinary  
and well-rounded

in my approach with these learners.

And so the first one  
here is Engaging Autism

by Stanley Greenspan and Serena Wieder.

The second one is The  
First Idea by Greenspan

and Shanker that I mentioned.

And the third one is  
by Dr. Mona Delahooke,

Beyond Behaviors.

And it really is a wonderful  
paradigm shift book,

really thinking about how  
to look at dysregulation,

disengagement and what has been presented

as challenging behavior much

of the time in the world of autism.

So looking at it differently



so that you can address it differently

and support it differently,  
which I think is so relevant

to this conversation about  
maximizing our impact with AAC.

So I wanna thank you  
and pause for questions.

I think you can turn your  
mic on, I'm not sure.

Otherwise pop your question in the chat

and we'll get to as many as we can

before the top of the hour

and then email me if we  
don't get to your questions

and I'd be happy to have  
discussions with you.

Right, so it says pondering  
if you write goals

about acknowledging modeling.

Yes, Brooke, I do.

I think that writing  
goals that are related

to the anchor strategies that we're using

such as attending to

and language modeling are super powerful.

I also like to write goals in  
parallel to goals like that

that are around reciprocity, right?

Circles of connection and  
communication is the way they talk

about it in the DIR model.

So even if that AAC device is  
collecting dust in the corner

because we're really just

figuring each other out  
and I haven't found the magic sauce  
that gets those models into view,  
I wanna see how do we open  
and close circles of  
communication together  
using our our non-symbolic  
non-linguistic ways  
of communicating.

Blair I might need your help  
because those questions  
are popping really fast.

- [Blair] Yes.

- And I'm having a hard  
time tracking and go for it.

- [Blair] There's another one  
about do you write engagement goals?

That's sort of similar to  
what you said with modeling,  
but kinda along the same lines.

- I do, I do.

And so an engagement goal  
might look something like  
when I get a really fun  
sensory social routine going,  
which is what Hanen, if anybody's  
Hanen trained in the room,  
it's what they call people play.  
If I get one of those going,  
then how does my learner  
tell me that they wanted  
to continue, right?  
And how many times did they tell me

that they wanted to continue,  
using whatever signal they wanna use,  
if it's a smile or a voice  
or body rock or whatever.

But engaging really is taking a turn  
and the activity with me too, right?

It isn't just sustaining attention to  
what I'm doing all the time.

So I'll write goals like that.

I think we see a hand or  
something raised here.

It looks like Joyce has a hand up.

Go ahead Joyce if you  
wanna pop your mic on.

- [Blair] Well while  
we're waiting on Joyce,

we can answer some of the other questions.

There's another one about  
how to get staff on board

with needing to regulate students first  
before they can learn.

Do you have any suggestions?  
- Yeah, I do.

This is a very common discussion,  
no matter what setting I've worked in.

I think the first reason

that people are resistant to  
helping with regulation is

that they feel confused and  
they don't know what to do.

I think we have a wide range  
of the way people  
respond to dysregulation.

If we have a child that  
can seem unpredictable,

I think staff are quite fearful

and so they may not focus  
on helping with regulation

in fear that they're gonna make the worse.

And then on the other side of  
that coin, we may have staff

that are perhaps not as  
reflective or observant

and open to the idea

that this child's behavior may  
be indicating dysregulation.

And so they're kind of pushing ahead.

They wanna over control  
to avoid the chaos.

And so I think the first  
piece I like to do is educate

around what regulation is.

I think that it's powerful for people

to think about it in themselves  
in a real layperson's way

of how they think and feel  
when they are dysregulated

and what kinds of things do that.

So I might have some exercises

and staff meetings that  
really encourage that.

And then also giving them ways

to start looking at their learner

and making it their job to  
recognize what regulates

and dysregulates their learner.

A lot of the times our  
staff have a job to do

that's been given to  
them or has been assumed.

So if it's in a school  
setting for example,

they've been told that this  
AAC device is to get the child

to ask for what they want.

And so their focus can  
be quite narrow on that.

If we shift gears and  
give them the permission

and also the responsibility for a week,

I really want to talk about what regulates

and dysregulates this learner

and I need your help  
in this detective work

and here are some tools  
that we can use together.

It starts with that recognition, right?

And then from that you can

build in some reflective  
discussion or training

around, okay, what do we do about it now?

But if they're not recognizing it,

they're not gonna have the tools

to bring to do something about it.

I wanna shorten my response there

and just see if we can  
have more questions,

but if you wanna keep that  
dialogue going, please email me.

I'd love to talk more about some ideas

for your particular staff needs.

- [Blair] Yeah, that's great Ideas.

We've had two people ask  
about like hand-over-hand

and just thoughts on discouraging that

or if you have any  
thoughts on that subject.

- Gosh, hand-over-hand is  
not seen as an evidence-based

or compassionate neuro affirming practice

in the AAC world right now.

It also has been shown to  
really enhance dependencies.

So in addition to being  
intrusive to the student,

it actually doesn't  
usually help AAC learning.

And so what some compromise  
has been in the field in terms

of prompt hierarchies is  
to use hand-under-hand

when it's been indicated that perhaps

that student needs some help  
in their motor stability.

And so a major difference  
between hand-under-hand

and hand-over-hand is really letting

that student initiate first.

So if a student is not  
reaching for their AAC device

or looking toward their AAC device,

they are not initiating  
a communication message

with that AAC device.

So me taking their hand  
in any way, shape or form

and putting it to that device

is really not a great  
learning path for them

because it isn't probably matching

what their mental state or intention is.

If I do have learners that  
are looking toward a device,

I may offer some hand-under-hand stability

and I may ask permission,

I'll give you some help under your hand.

And some of my learners really show me

that they do appreciate that stability

where they might reach for  
their device and not be accurate

and that stability really  
helps them isolate a finger

or really narrow in

and have more control over their movement

so that they can try to get  
to what they're trying to say.

So that would be my short  
answer to hand-over-hand.

I don't use it.

I haven't for 10 years or more

and most people in the AAC world would say

that it isn't evidence-based or affirming

and so it should be avoided.

- [Blair] Okay,

I think we've got time  
for one more question.

Marcia asked, she said having access

to an AAC device at all  
times is a best practice,

but what do you suggest staff do  
with a designated AAC device  
when the student is dysregulated  
and exhibiting aggressive behavior  
and use of an AAC device  
is not safe at that time?

- So in unfortunately,  
we're gonna acknowledge this as well,  
sometimes AAC devices can be available,  
but they can't be in the  
immediate environment.

I like to wear AAC devices for my learners  
who are at this stage where  
they're still learning  
to regulate and engage.

And so if I wear it  
and I'm the primary partner,  
then I know that it's available  
and it's in a place  
where hopefully we can  
keep everybody safe.

Sometimes I do need to remove it.

It isn't useful at that time, right?

If I wouldn't talk to  
somebody who is dysregulated

because that would dysregulate them more,

I'm not going to use the AAC device,

but I could take advantage

of the after the moment, right?

So after we regulate it  
together and we've used gesture

and other ways to help get our needs met,



then can we sit down in a calm space  
and have a reflective dialogue  
that's at a developmentally  
appropriate level,  
then model some things on the AAC device.

And some learners are at  
this developmental level  
and others are still getting there.

This may look something like, you know,  
I saw you got really sad when mom left.  
We gave you hugs and we sat quiet together  
and then we found something to play  
and we talked about how  
mom was gonna come later.

And so you are gonna know  
based on the learner's level

of dysregulation, what  
their triggers are, right?

Bringing mom back up again  
may cause the wound to reopen

and so I wouldn't do it with that learner.

But don't forget that after the fact,

when we are calm, we can  
always revisit hard situations

and name some of those emotions

and name some of those factors

to help us make sense of the experience.

- [Blair] Awesome.

Well, thank you Tanna,

for sharing your knowledge with us today.

It was very informative.

And make sure to register

for part two if you'd like to learn more.

If you would like to  
earn ASHA CEUs for today,

please remember to  
complete the assessment.

You'll find the link to  
the assessment in the chat

or you'll be redirected

to the post session page  
once this webinar ends.

The link to the assessment  
will also be included

in the follow up email  
that will go out tomorrow.

The assessment must be  
completed at 80% or better

and it will remain open for one week.

So thank you all for attending

and we hope to see you  
at part two very soon.

Thanks so much.  
- Thanks everybody.

- [Blair] Bye everyone.