

Introduction to Module

This module focuses on the interventions used to enable children and young people with Severe Learning Difficulties, Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties and Complex Learning Difficulties, to communicate more effectively, including some unconventional means of communication, together with the use of supportive technologies.

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) is the term used to describe methods of communication which can be used to supplement the more usual methods of speech and writing when these are impaired. AAC may include unaided systems such as signing and gesture, as well as aided techniques ranging from picture charts to the most sophisticated computer technology currently available. AAC can be a way to help someone understand, as well as a means of expression.

Assistive Technology (AT) is an umbrella term that includes assistive, adaptive devices for people with disabilities and also includes the process used in selecting, locating, and using them. AT promotes greater independence by enabling people to perform tasks that they were formerly unable to accomplish, or had great difficulty accomplishing, by providing enhancements to or changed methods of interacting with the technology needed to accomplish such tasks.

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

The Situation

- If possible choose to communicate in a quiet environment with minimal background noise so you can concentrate on the conversation.
- Face the person you are talking with - we all find it easier to communicate naturally when we can pick up visual clues like body language, gesture and facial expressions.
- Everyone communicates in a different way - this is exactly the same for someone who uses AAC. Start off by asking if there is anything specific that they need to help them be successful in your interaction.

Starting Off

Before you start a conversation, be aware that however brief the interaction, you will need more time than you would with a speaking person. Be prepared to give that time. When you ask a question please wait for a reply.

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

Developing Conversations

- Take the time to make sure you have understood the person using AAC correctly by rephrasing their response.
- Because the pace of interaction is slower it helps to introduce one topic of conversation at a

time.

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

Repairing Misunderstandings

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

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

Ending Conversations

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

Last Thoughts

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

(Speaking with Someone who uses AAC published by Communication Matters 2008)

10 tips for making communication successful

1 Reduce background noise.

Choose a quiet place so you can both concentrate on the conversation.

2 Face the person you are talking to and make eye contact.

However, remember not all children and young people will be happy, or able, to look you in the eye. Those with autism may find this particularly difficult and young people using some sort of communication aid or book/board will have to look at what they are doing.

3 Tell them if it is the first time you have met and talked to a person who uses an alternative method of communication.

This will give the other person the opportunity to show you the best way to communicate with each other.

4 Ask them what helps.

Ask them to show you how they use their AAC system to help you understand what, if anything, you need to do to make communication successful.

5 Establish how they communicate 'yes' and 'no'.

This may not always be the obvious nod and shake of the head.

6 When you ask a question wait for a reply.

This sounds obvious but for some people it may take them longer to reply than you may usually wait for an answer.

7 Be patient.

Sometimes it can be tempting to finish off a person's sentence for them and some welcome this as a way of speeding up communication. However, others may find this annoying so always ask if the other person is happy for you to do this.

8 Always be honest about how much of the conversation you have understood.

This will give the other person opportunity to explain points that have not been understood, or ask for support.

9 If you don't have enough time, then agree to meet later.

You will need to give time to the conversation.

10 Check back and recap.

When finishing a conversation, make sure that you both agree you have said all what you wanted to and check you have both understood everything that was communicated.

What are the benefits of using alternative ways to communicate?

For children and young people who rely on using different methods of communication it can have a dramatic impact on their lives. It can enable them to:

- express their feelings
- ask questions and say what they need
- feel good about themselves
- develop relationships with their family and friends
- participate in school, work and play
- be involved in decisions about their future
- live an independent life
- gain employment

For a lot of children and young people it allows them to live their lives to the full and have the same life opportunities as any other person.

Real life stories

The following stories are about children and young people who use different methods of communication and the journey they and their families have taken.

Sophie's story

Sophie is three years old. When she was a baby, Sophie did not babble like other babies, instead she communicated by crying and screaming. Sophie's mother found it difficult to explain what was wrong with Sophie, only that she was so different from her two older brothers. At one and a half, she was referred for speech and language therapy. When they met with the speech and language therapist it was suggested that Sophie would benefit from therapy that would teach her and her mother how to sign to help her communicate. This therapy has been fantastic for Sophie and her mother and taught them how to communicate with each other by signing. Their confidence grows as they learn more signs and have successful interaction.

Benefits of Sophie using this method of communication: Sophie can now communicate with her mother and they have started to develop a mother/daughter relationship that was previously missing. Sophie can express her likes and dislikes and her sense of humour. Her brothers have been able to get involved and now they all use signing with Sophie and teach her new signs. In a little over a year Sophie has learnt to sign over 100 words.

Callum's story

Callum is three years old, all areas of his development are delayed and he has low muscle tone which affects his ability to walk and talk. He was able to understand what he heard but had no way of communicating what he wanted or needed. His speech and language therapist and mother started work on using symbols for Callum to choose what he wanted at home and school. At two and a half he was given a simple electronic communication aid, which brought voice to the symbols. By pressing the picture on his communication aid Callum can make choices and 'say' what he wants. Benefits of Callum using this method of communication: Very quickly Callum was able to communicate with the rest of the children in his nursery class and get them to sing the song he chose or listen to the story he wanted. Now he uses a range of ways to communicate including his communication aid, some words and signs and facial expressions. The family find having a range of skills they can use for different situations has helped Callum take control.

Jeon's story

Jeon is 4 years old and was born prematurely. His first years saw him struggle with significant health issues and so far he has developed no speech beyond one or two simple sounds, however his understanding of what is said to him is excellent. Jeon was referred to the local Child Development Centre before he was one year old, and he was seen by a range of professionals including a community paediatrician, a speech and language therapist and an occupational therapist. At the Child Development Centre it became clear the reason Jeon struggled with speech was because he has severe speech dyspraxia, which means he has difficulty in making and co-ordinating the precise movements needed for speech. This affects individual speech sounds and in sequencing sounds together in words, making speech very unclear. On the therapist's advice the family started to use a combination of signing and symbols together with speech.

Benefits of Jeon using these methods of communication: Jeon can now ask for things

using signing and symbols to support his speech when it is difficult to understand and he can give clues about why he's upset. Using symbols and signs has opened up communication for the entire family. Jeon's parents found meeting other parents at the Child Development Centre and at the workshops a great support.

Jenni's story

Jenni is 17, she has cerebral palsy, uses a wheelchair and is unable to walk. She understands everything that is said to her but cannot communicate with speech so she indicates "yes"

and "no" by nodding and shaking her head. Jenni has also learned to point with her eyes to vocabulary in a specially designed communication book as a way of communicating. To develop her communication Jenni was provided with a Voice Output Communication Aid (VOCA) when she was 10, which she controlled using a specially made switch that looks like a grab bar. Jenni pulls the switch to start the device scanning through a range of choices on a vocabulary page and then pushes it to select the one she wants to use. Jenni has also been able to test other equipment to find out what best meets her needs. She now also uses an eye pointing system, which amongst other functions, allows her to access and send e-mails and text messages.

Benefits of Jenni using this method of communication: Now Jenni has access to a range of communication support systems Jenni is able to live a more independent life and will be starting college in the autumn.

Tamil's story

Tamil is 6 years old and has severe learning difficulties. It became clear early on that he had significant difficulties with all aspects of learning and communication. Tamil was assessed when he was a baby at a Child Development Centre and was offered a place at weekly therapy and support sessions for children with learning disabilities. Tamil also attended a signing session once a week. Tamil is now at school and has developed his use of signing. The school also uses symbols to help the children complete tasks such as reading and writing and Tamil's understanding of this method is progressing well. He can now select a symbol from a small choice, and with help he can stick the symbol on to his picture. The school have offered training sessions for the whole family so now everyone is involved.

Benefits of Tamil using this method of communication: Tamil's parents and carers use signing to help him understand general instructions or questions. His parents are extremely pleased with the progress he is making with communication and learning.

(Taken from Other Ways of Speaking: Supporting children and young people who have no speech or whose speech is difficult to understand The Communication Trust)
