

# Getting Started with AAC

## PARENT GUIDE

*Many children have medical conditions that impact their ability to speak and learn language.*

*But thanks to **augmentative and alternative communication (AAC)**, an inability to speak no longer means an inability to communicate.*

*AAC encompasses a wide range of nonverbal communication methods, from sign language and picture boards to mobile device apps and sophisticated speech-generating devices (SGDs).*



*Many AAC users are enjoying full and productive lives, communicating spontaneously wherever and whenever they want, and even living independently with assistance from advanced AAC devices.*

*This is the first in a series of guides to help parents better understand AAC and how it can help your child reach his or her communication potential.*

# Today's AAC: Enabling, Empowering & Enhancing Quality of Life

*The goal of AAC is to enable individuals to express their needs and wants, share novel thoughts and ideas, and actively engage with others at home, at school, in the workplace, and in social situations.*

*Technology advances, new insights in language development, and greater AAC training for speech-language pathologists (SLPs), therapists, educators, and other professionals have created a wide array of AAC options and support for individuals with communication challenges.*



## Who Uses AAC?

Any person with a disability that finds it difficult to communicate may benefit from AAC.

Some people will need AAC because of a congenital condition that has been present since birth, such as cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, autism, or a learning disability. Others may need AAC if they lose their ability to communicate as the result of an acquired condition resulting from a stroke or brain injury, or due to a degenerative disease such as ALS.

Some will need AAC only for a short time; others may use it throughout their lives. In many cases, an individual will continue to work on natural speech development while using AAC.

## Types of AAC

AAC includes any method of communicating other than verbal speech. There are many types of AAC: Gestures, sign language, picture symbols, apps, and speech-generating devices (SGDs).

Some methods are ideal for building vocabulary and language skills; others support the needs of the more advanced communicator.

AAC includes both *unaided* and *aided* communication systems:

- **Unaided systems**, like sign language and gesturing, rely on the user's body to convey messages and do not require special materials or equipment. These forms of communication can be effective for children and adults who are able to use their hands and have adequate fine coordination skills. Those with whom they interact must be able to understand the signs for successful communicating.
- **Aided systems** use pictureboards, books, and assistive technology such as apps and electronic SGDs.



## Access Options

Depending on motor control capabilities, there are several ways an individual can use or operate aided forms of communication. Access options include:

- **Direct selection**, which requires selecting a symbol, word, or letter using eye-gaze technology, infrared sensing (head tracking), joystick and alternative mouse control and touch access with the hand, other body part, or with a stylus.
- **Indirect selection**, which involves activating a single switch or multiple switches within a scanning pattern to make a selection. A switch is a small device connected to a communication device that lets a person with limited movement control actions on a screen. Switches can be placed in a variety of locations and operated in numerous ways, including using a body part or a puff of air.

AAC access methods should be personalized to meet an individual's needs and support the two goals shared by most who use AAC: Saying exactly what they want to say and saying it as fast as they can.

## Major AAC Methods & Devices

### Picture Exchange Communication Symbols

**(PECS)**—PECS is an AAC intervention strategy for individuals with autism spectrum disorder and other developmental disabilities.

PECS begins by teaching an individual to request items by exchanging picture symbols with a communication partner, who then responds appropriately. In more advanced phases, individuals are taught to answer questions and to comment.

**Communication Books and Boards**—Collections of picture symbols are often arranged on communication boards, in books, or on low-tech eye-gaze frames. Typically, the child will point to a picture symbol on a board or in a book to communicate. In addition, a child might use his or her eyes and look at a certain symbol to communicate a want, need, or thought.

**SGDs**—These rugged and portable electronic devices allow the user to select letters, words, and messages, alone or in combination, to be spoken aloud in a pre-recorded



or computer-generated voice (text-to-speech).

“Dedicated” devices are intended for communication purposes only, while other “integrated” SGDs have features that let the device perform as a computer, access the Internet, and act as an environmental control tool, such as for controlling a television.

SGD access options range from eye-gaze technology, infrared sensing (head tracking), joystick and alternative mouse control, touch access, and single and multiple switch control. Even children with severe physical limitations often can operate a life-changing AAC device.

A major advantage of SGDs is that the device allows the individual to say and play with words. By doing this, learners can acquire new words and language. In addition, the listener is able to understand exactly what is being expressed. Evidence also suggests that pairing the communicated word with voice output may help the child with auditory processing of spoken language.

SGDs may be funded by Medicaid, Medicare, or private insurance after certain requirements are met, including professional evaluations and assistive technology recommendations.

**Apps**—A number of apps are now available for mobile devices that feature vocabulary-building and text-to-speech capabilities. For some who use AAC, an app can be very effective; others who need greater language development support or special access options due to physical limitations may find an app too limiting.

## Choosing a Vocabulary Program for a Device or App

Selecting the right vocabulary program or app is an important decision. You want to choose a well-organized evidenced-based program. Vocabulary programs should be primarily based on **single words** with access to some whole phrases and sentences. Additionally, programs should contain **core vocabulary**, the words we use and reuse 80% of the time in our daily conversation.

Vocabulary programs should also be efficient, powerful, functional and give the individual the ability to be an independent communicator.



## Determining the Best AAC Solution for Your Child

The SLP is typically the most important and influential professional on your child's support team. The SLP evaluates your child's needs and abilities and identifies the most appropriate AAC solutions. He or she also plays a primary role in completing insurance funding requests for an AAC device, when applicable, and in helping your child effectively use his/her device.

Among the factors your SLP will consider in recommending an AAC system(s):

- Your child's current expressive language (what is communicated);
- Your child's current receptive language (what is understood);
- Your child's cognitive abilities;
- Your child's physical abilities;
- What vocabulary is most relevant to your child;
- What activities or interests motivate your child.



## Your Child's Most Important AAC Partner: You

You and your child will likely work with a support team that includes an SLP, occupational and physical therapists, caregivers, classroom teachers, and others. These professionals will be instrumental in recommending and implementing AAC with your child.

You are your child's most important and constant AAC partner. Understanding AAC and how it can help your child achieve his or her communication potential will better prepare you to make important decisions as a member of your child's team and equip you to request the tools and resources to meet your child's unique needs.

Today, millions of children and adults worldwide who cannot rely on their natural speech to communicate are using AAC to be heard. With AAC, your child CAN have a voice!

## The Ultimate Goal: Learning Language

Language acquisition is the ultimate goal of AAC. Providing children with single words and teaching them how to put those words together for complex language.

Learning to use language will enable your child to go beyond pre-programmed words and simple requests to being able to express personal thoughts, feelings, humor, and emotions.

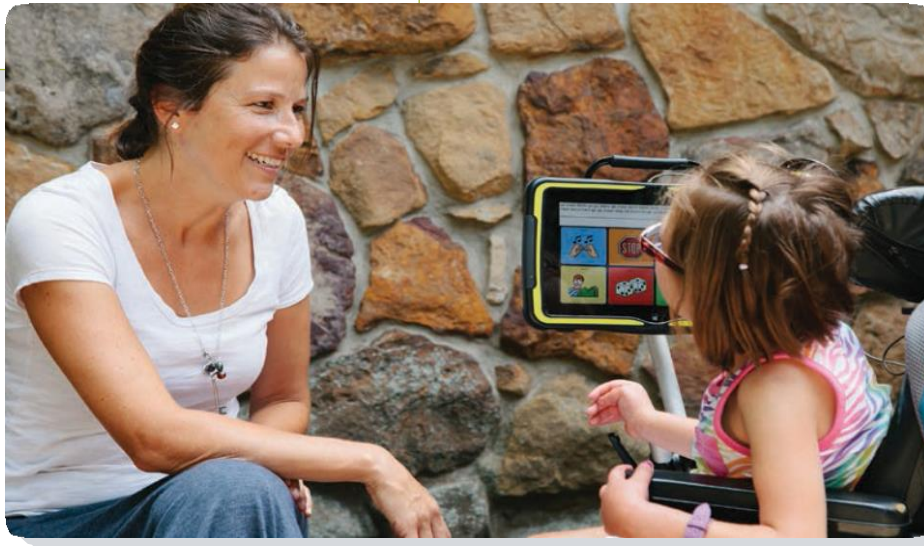
*"It is imperative that the goal of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) use be the most effective interactive communication possible. Anything less represents a compromise of the individual's human potential."*

*American Speech-Language-Hearing Association*



# AAC Fiction & Facts

FICTION:	FACT:
AAC should be introduced only after giving up hope of natural speech development.	You can continue to work on natural speech development while encouraging AAC use for communication. <sup>1</sup>
AAC decreases the motivation to work on speech.	Often, hearing a verbal model consistently on an AAC device will encourage children's natural speech. <sup>2</sup>
There are language/cognitive prerequisites that need to be met in order for AAC to be successful.	Children with severe cognitive deficiencies are capable of learning and benefiting from AAC. <sup>3</sup>
If present, verbal speech should be used exclusively.	Requiring exclusively verbal speech may underestimate a child's ability. Children using AAC have shown improvements in behavior, attention, independence, self-confidence, class participation, academic progress, and social interaction. <sup>4</sup>



1 Cress, Cynthia J., & Marvin, Christine A. (2003). Common Questions about AAC Services in Early Intervention. *Augmentative and Alternative Communication*, 19(4), 254-272.

2 Millar, D. C., Light, J. C., & Schlosser, R. W. (2006). The impact of augmentative and alternative communication intervention on the speech production of individuals with developmental disabilities: a research review. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 49(2), 248-264.

Schlosser, Ralf W., & Wendt, Oliver. (2008). Effects of Augmentative and Alternative Communication Intervention on Speech Production in Children with Autism: A Systematic Review. *Am J Speech Lang Pathol*, 17(3), 212-230.

Binger, C., Berens, J., Kent-Walsh, J., & Taylor, S. (2008). The effects of aided AAC interventions on AAC use, speech, and symbolic gestures. *Semin Speech Lang*, 29(2), 101-111.

3 Dada, S., & Alant, E. (2009). The effect of aided language stimulation on vocabulary acquisition in children with little or no functional speech. *Am J Speech Lang Pathol*, 18(1), 50-64.

## Additional Resources for Parents

### *AAC Language Lab*

**[aaclanguagelab.com](http://aaclanguagelab.com)**

Free educational resources and teaching aids to support language development, vocabulary acquisition, and effective AAC use.

### *The Center for AAC and Autism*

**[aacandautism.com](http://aacandautism.com)**

Online resource dedicated to building awareness of the power of AAC to change the lives of children with autism and other developmental disabilities that limit communication skills.

### *Realize Language*

**[realizelanguage.com](http://realizelanguage.com)**

Online service that gives parents and professionals powerful ways to monitor, measure, and maximize a child's use of an AAC device.

### *Speech Pathology Australia*

**[speechpathologyaustralia.com.au](http://speechpathologyaustralia.com.au)**

The national professional association for more than 7800 members who are speech-language pathologists.



## About Liberator

Liberator is a world-leading supplier of products, training and support for communication, inclusion and independence.

Our aim is to help you achieve the best communication possible for the people you support, whatever their age or ability.

In addition to powerful AAC devices, Liberator provides teaching and implementation ideas, therapy materials, curriculum sequences, funding assistance, and training to speech-language pathologists, special educators, and the families of people who communicate with AAC.

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