

# Technology Solutions for Adults with Communication Disabilities

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*One of the most difficult and emotional challenges for someone who experiences a traumatic brain injury, stroke, or neurological illness is temporarily or permanently losing the ability to speak.*

**Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) technology can offer practical solutions and new hope for adults who are dealing with an unexpected speech disability.**

*AAC can help adults maintain relationships with loved ones, take part in social and family activities, and achieve their highest level of independence and autonomy. AAC can be a vital communication lifeline at home, in the*

*workplace, in social*

*situations, and in medical settings.*

*This Guide can help you better understand AAC technology for adults and how to select an AAC solution for an adult user.*

# How AAC Can Enhance the Quality of Life

The goal of AAC is to enable communication for individuals who cannot speak with their natural voice. Anyone with a temporary or permanent disability that makes it difficult or impossible to communicate verbally can benefit from AAC.

Some AAC users are born with a congenital condition that impacts speech such as cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, autism, or a learning disability. Others are adults who need AAC due to a stroke, brain injury, or degenerative neurological disease like ALS.

Some adults need AAC only for a short time. Stroke victims, for example, may use AAC technology on a short-term basis as they strive to recover their ability to speak. Other users may rely on AAC throughout their lives.

## How an AAC Device Works

AAC solutions for adults range from apps on tablet computers to advanced devices designed specifically for communication.

An AAC device is a tablet- or laptop-sized system with a built-in language program and voice-output capabilities to audibly “speak” words for the user. Most language programs are spelling-based because adults are literate and often prefer to use the simplest communication methods.



One of the key benefits of AAC devices is having multiple ways to access the technology. Flexible access methods can be especially helpful for adults with physical limitations, especially if their condition may change over time.

In addition to directly touching the keyboard, AAC devices also can be operated by:

- Eye-gaze systems that give the user visual control of the device;
- Head-tracking optical sensors that convert the natural movement of the user’s head to control the pointer on the screen;
- Switches that are controlled by the user’s hand, foot, elbow, knee, or a puff of air.



Many modern AAC

devices also go far beyond speech

output to offer Internet access, phone and texting capabilities, and environmental control options. This type of technology can transform a speech-generating device into a multifunctional system for communicating, connecting, contributing, and sharing with others.



## Helping Adults Achieve Success with AAC

Adults who are dealing with the unexpected loss of speech typically are facing many challenges. Embracing a new and unfamiliar technology for communication can be difficult in such stressful circumstances.

Selecting the right device is essential. A professional speech-language pathologist who understands AAC can conduct an evaluation to help an adult get off to a good start with a device suited to their needs.

Support from family and caregivers can be crucial to a successful outcome. Family members can play a vital role in helping an adult learn and use AAC technology for everyday communication to remain actively engaged in social, family, and professional situations.

Once an adult begins using a device, ongoing support from a team of therapists and professionals with in-depth knowledge of AAC technology can help an individual maximize the value of the technology and adapt to new access methods for operating the device if their condition changes.



## What to Consider in Selecting an AAC Device

Here are some of the features to consider when helping an adult communicator select an AAC device:

- ✓ **Ease of use:** Adults want to quickly learn how to use a device and start communicating. Look for a device with setup wizards and built-in Help functions.
- ✓ **Portability:** Adults on the go need a device that's easy to take along. Select a device designed for transporting.
- ✓ **Screen size:** A larger display screen with larger pictures and text can be very helpful, especially for adults who are using eye-gaze, head-tracking, switches, or other methods to operate the technology.
- ✓ **The ability to customize:** Look for a device that offers you the ability to customize features and vocabulary, such as preprogramming family names, frequently visited places, favorite foods, and other commonly used words and phrases into the software.
- ✓ **Web-enabled:** Many adults want a speech device with full computer functionality so they can access the Internet, text, email, and use social networking. Built-in WiFi™, Bluetooth® phone technology, USB and HDMI ports, and cameras can give adults powerful ways to connect and communicate.
- ✓ **Environmental controls:** Some AAC devices can be equipped with tools to manage a home environment, such as turning lights on and off. This can help an adult remain independent and stay in their home environment for as long as possible.
- ✓ **Flexible access options:** A device that offers multiple access methods can make communication possible even when motor control capabilities change.
- ✓ **Bilingual vocabulary:** Some devices offer both English and Spanish vocabulary and voices.
- ✓ **Trial period:** Look for a device that comes with a limited-time trial so the adult and their family members and caregivers can test the device.

## Facts about Funding

Speech-generating devices and therapy services can be funded by the NDIS and various other funding systems that are still operational after certain requirements are met, including assessments and assistive technology recommendations by speech and medical professionals.

Funding options may differ depending upon whether the device is dedicated or integrated. A dedicated device is intended for communication purposes only; an integrated device has features that let the device perform as a computer with internet access.

## Additional Resources for Adults with Acquired Speech Disabilities

### ALS Association

[www.alsa.org](http://www.alsa.org)

The ALS Association is leading the fight to treat and cure ALS through global research and nationwide advocacy while also empowering people with Lou Gehrig's Disease and their families to live fuller lives by providing them with compassionate care and support.

### MND Australia

[www.mndaust.asn.au](http://www.mndaust.asn.au)

As the national body for people living with MND their aim is to encourage collaboration with members to:

- Promote optimal care outcomes for people living with MND.
- Enable research that will identify the cause and lead to better care, control, and ultimately a cure for MND.



## 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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