Considerations for Selecting Augmentative Communication Devices

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It has been estimated that 8 to 12 people per 1,000 experience severe communication impairments that require AAC. These individuals come from all age groups, socioeconomic groups and racial and ethnic backgrounds. In order to improve the ability to communicate with others, some type of augmentative/alternative communication (AAC) intervention is often needed. One element of AAC intervention may be the selection of a communication device: a physical object that is used to communicate messages to others. Selection of a communication device is usually a team process, requiring input from the user, family members, professional staff and a speech language pathologist specializing in the field of AAC. Here are some of the considerations that should be examined when use of a communication device is being contemplated:

Access: how can the user access the device? (i.e. direct selection, scanning, optical pointing etc.)

Vocabulary Capacity: how many vocabulary items can the device accommodate…on a single display, in the entire device?

Language Capacity: does this device allow multi-word combinations, easy access to verb tensing, morphemes and other linguistic skills? Do the support materials/programs provide guidance in moving through the developmental levels of language? Can the device accommodate spelling capabilities?

Output: what type of output does the device provide when the user accesses it (i.e. voice output, print, access to a computer, etc.)?

Display: what type of display is available to the user and the listeners (pictures, words, digital images, etc.)?

Size of Device: what are the measurements of the total available space? What are the dimensions of the display targets?

Portability: how easily can the user carry around or transport the device.

Durability: can the device take the kind of wear and tear the intended user is likely to inflict?

Complexity: how complex is the device for the user to learn? How complex is the device for the programmers/facilitators to learn? It's VERY important to make accurate estimates about the training time that will be needed.

Compatibility: how does this device fit with other devices the user may be using (i.e. a computer), how does it fit into his/her lifestyle?

Upgradeability: can this device grow as the user and/or the technology grows?

Maintenance: how often will the device need repair? How long do repairs take? Is there a warranty program?

Technical Support: for high tech devices, can you easily access technical advice if you are having problems? Is such support free or must you pay?

Cost: what is the cost of the device? Don't forget to factor in staff time for programming etc. Sometimes a device appears less expensive, but in the long-term it can be more costly because it requires a lot of staff/support time.

Appearance: how does the device look to the user and significant others? Is it age appropriate?