



10 Basic Things You Will Want to Know About Augmentative/Alternative Communication

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“..if all my possessions were taken from me with one exception, I would chose to keep the power of communication, for by it I would soon regain all the rest.”

Daniel Webster

1. Augmentative/alternative communication (AAC) is an area of expertise which helps people who have difficulty using their voice and natural speech express themselves in other ways.
2. Many children who have not learned to speak, as well as individuals who have lost the ability to speak due to accidents or illness, can benefit from using AAC “devices” which can help them communicate with family members, friends, teachers, colleagues and people in the community.
3. Introducing very young children to AAC systems often helps support their speech development and is often critical for cognitive and language development.
4. Individuals may transition through several techniques and devices as they grow and their needs and abilities change. For example: Mary may start pointing to pictures when she is 4 years old, then learn how to use a device that “speaks a sentence” when she pushes a picture when she starts school, and then transition to using a device with specialized software/apps for communication when she is older.
5. Devices should not be randomly selected out of catalogs or magazine advertisements. There are many devices on the market. No one device is right for everyone. An evaluation provided by a speech and language pathologist with experience and expertise in AAC will help match the users abilities and needs with a specific device. In practice, a speech and language therapist will collaborate with many other professionals to help make the best decision.
6. The AAC user and family members should have significant input into the selection of a device. They should ask questions until they understand what is being recommended and should consider bringing someone along to the evaluation so they can talk about it later. Ultimately, the user and the family must be comfortable with the AAC device choice or it probably won't be used.
7. No one device is perfect. All devices have benefits and limitations. An AAC user may need to make compromises or use more than one device depending on communication partners and environments. The “best” device is not the device that everyone else has or the most expensive device. The “best” device is the device that helps the user be a better communicator based on their needs and the device features.
8. All devices require some training. Some devices require learning new or special skills and some require a lot of practice. It is a good idea to get a device on a trial basis before it is purchased to make sure it is the right device. Training needs to be provided by someone experienced and familiar with AAC techniques and the device being used.
9. Funding for AAC devices is available from a variety of sources including school districts, rehabilitation agencies, and public/private health insurance providers. Each funding agency has its own eligibility criteria and policies and each requires its own specific documentation. Most have appeal procedures if there is an initial denial. When trying to obtain funding, keep records of all contacts including date, name, and comments as well as reports and other correspondence.
10. As a listener, it takes patience to talk to a person using an AAC device because the pace of conversation is often slower and the device or techniques might be unfamiliar. But, it is well worth it. Communication defines who we are as people and whether we use natural speech, picture boards, or speech output devices, each of us is an important part of the human family.

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