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Authentic Voice in AAC

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learning | **as unique** | as every student



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Learning outcomes

- Differences between compliance-based communication and authentic communication
- Develop familiarity with strategies to promote connection and honouring student voice
- Strategies to increase language development and autonomous communication across the school day



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Why are we here?

Josh is:

- An incredible father to neurodivergent kiddos
 - And one who uses AAC! She is amazing!
- An educator with years of experience in the complex needs classroom where he worked with students who used various forms of AAC
- An open communicator who wants us all to understand and respect one another



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Why are we here?

Jasmine is:

- A member of CBE'S AAC SLP team committed to making sure students all have a voice and are heard.
- The parent of a child with a learning disability.
- A person who is neurodivergent.
- Involved with many outside programs for AAC users, such as the University of Alberta's AAC camp



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What is AAC?

AAC stands for augmentative and alternative communication. It refers to tools and strategies that can enhance speech or provide a completely different means of communication. AAC can be aided (i.e., using a tool) or unaided (i.e., no tool needed), such as sign language or gestures. The truth is we all use some AAC. We text, type, write and use gestures. Additional tools, such as communication devices, books or apps, can provide a means of communication for individuals who are unable to speak or for whom speech is not always their primary mode.

@theaaccoach

Kate McLaughlin <https://www.theaaccoach.com/>

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nwacs.info

Assistive Technology:
Any item that is used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of persons with disabilities.

Augmentative Alternative Communication:
Any device, system, strategy, or tool that supports or replaces verbal speech.

Speech Generating Device:
A piece of technology that creates voice output.



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Is this person capable of learning AAC?

A handy decision-
making flowchart

Are they breathing?

No

Yes

Not likely.

This person is a
candidate for
AAC.

Rachael Langley AAC Specialist



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FEAR VERSUS FACT

DEBUNKING COMMON AAC MISCONCEPTIONS NWACS.INFO

?	📖
<p>AAC prevents verbal speech from developing.</p> <p>Preschoolers and toddlers are too young for AAC.</p> <p>Some children are too impaired to use AAC.</p> <p>If a child can speak a little, they don't need AAC.</p>	<p>AAC can support verbal speech development.</p> <p>AAC is proven to be effective for children as young as 12 months.</p> <p>Anyone can benefit from AAC.</p> <p>AAC will improve communication and possibly improve verbal communication.</p>
<p>AAC will fix all communication difficulties.</p> <p>Low tech solutions, like picture books, are the first step.</p> <p>Children need to be able to match or identify pictures before getting AAC.</p> <p>There are cognitive and behavioral prerequisite skills before getting AAC.</p>	<p>It's not that simple.</p> <p>There is no first step or prerequisite required for a speech generating device.</p> <p>Children don't need to be able to do anything before getting AAC.</p> <p>NO PRE-REQUISITES All people, at any age are appropriate for AAC.</p>
<p>Once someone gets AAC, they will have to use it forever.</p> <p>AAC is a last resort for kids that aren't making progress in speech therapy.</p> <p>AAC devices are only for children with intact cognition.</p> <p>AAC makes children look abnormal.</p>	<p>Sometimes children "outgrow" AAC and become verbal communicators.</p> <p>AAC is an important intervention consideration, especially for young children.</p> <p>Anyone --- any age, any ability --- can benefit from AAC.</p> <p>A child is at greater risk of being judged when they do not have the ability to communicate.</p>

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Communication happens EVERYWHERE!

- This is a Safety and ACCESSIBILITY need
- We are responsible for ensuring our students tools are OUT, come with them and are being modelled.
- If there are concerns about the safety of a communication device in the classroom talk to your SLP or OT

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Why does AAC matter to us? Human Rights

COMMUNICATION
IS A RIGHT, NOT A
PRIVILEGE

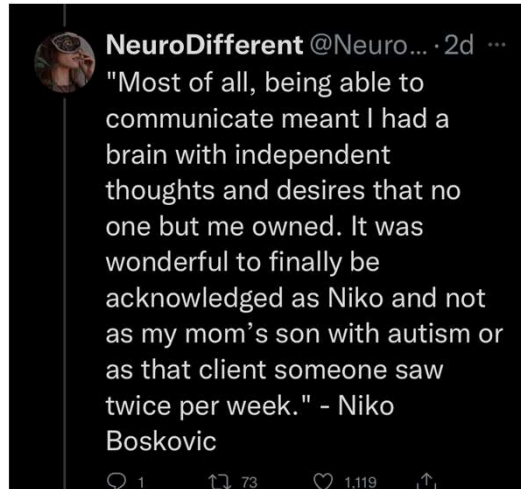
Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

"Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas ...

Empowerment is everything



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Why does AAC matter to us? Safety, Respect and Learning



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• Respect

- Communication with AAC takes time. We can learn ways to make adjustments to our interaction styles that will encourage and support people who may be beginning or even experienced AAC users.
- All people are worthy of respect and dignity.



Personal safety

- the more severe the speech problem, the greater prevalence of sexual abuse." People who cannot rely on speech may be perceived by their assailants as a "low-risk, easy target" for abuse. (Fitzsimmons 2009)



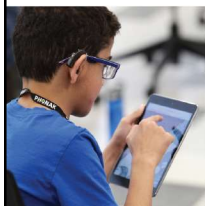
QR codes leads to resources on supporting AAC users from AssistiveWare

Why communication matters?



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- Access to Learning and Literacy
 - Communication is the means by which our students represent their knowledge and participate in their school and community environments.
- Relationships
 - Most of our communication centres on sharing information and engaging in social routine exchanges. It is
 - Without the ability to express oneself, understand what is happening to them, or connect with others, students with complex communication needs can experience trauma.
- Communication is how kids can engage at school, build relationships and participate in their communities



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Compliance-based communication



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- Compliance-based communication approaches have been used in the past as they were thought to encourage increased communication output and lead to language development.
- People with developmental disabilities often have reduced choice and control. They are rewarded for compliance and punished for speaking out. When such an emergent communicator expresses a negative opinion, it is very likely to be interpreted as a challenging behavior. It may not be viewed as an opinion to be valued and considered.

What families want for their kids? Autonomous Communication



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- Autonomous communication means developing lifelong communicators who have the ability of self-determination. This is not the same as INDEPENDENT communication.
- If our goal is to teach people to be autonomous, then they need to experience choice and control from as young an age as possible. They need to experience that when they express any opinion, even negative, it is valued. (retrieved Avaz 2022)
- Many of our students will still require support from communication partners for communicative success, because it is through our interactions that we can build meaning. We don't have interactions and relationships in a vacuum.

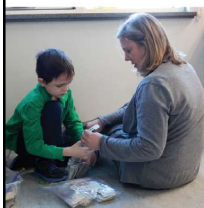
Why focus on authenticity?



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- Represents our true selves, our values, interests and priorities
- Respects the autonomy and uniqueness of everyone in our surroundings.
- We don't presume to know what anyone else thinks or knows, offering meaningful opportunities for communication.
- The most important this is for the person who uses AAC to be able to talk about what they want to talk about
 - This means what WE might think are great goals are not meaningful or important to the user (e.g. sharing personal information vs being able to en

Authentic communication



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- Access to a robust vocabulary
- Modelling of the AAC tools or communication device for the learner is done without expectations of any particular response
- The AAC system supports the learner's motor system and remains consistent
- The AAC system is always available

The focus is on communicating to create authentic connections and interactions with those around us, not simply to make basic requests.

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AAC NEWSFLASH:

All methods of communication are valid and must be respected.

No one method of communication is inherently better than another. Not speech, Not AAC. Our learners should use whatever method works for them in the moment. Our job is to give them lots of tools and respect how they choose to communicate. Gestures, signs, robust AAC, speech, echolalia, typing, body movements, etc. It's all good! Prioritize successful communication and authentic connection.

@theaaccoach

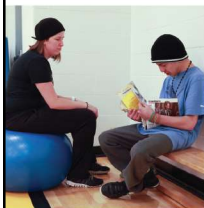
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6 years old WordPower 108 No Keyboard

Read
What do you want to read? You want to read a story?
Story
We're reading a story about Penny.
Book
N
O
(giggle!)
G
O
N
O
O
(giggle!)
D
L
E
Nogonoodle
No go noodle right now
Y?

What types of goals do we see?



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- Most IPP goals are short term and don't necessarily clearly support authentic communication or language development
- IPP sometimes contain compliance-based goals that are related to our desire as educators for students to demonstrate competencies that are clearly measurable, such as:
 - Answering a question about the calendar
 - AAC being used to answer rote questions on demand, often yes no
 - Goals where the partner knows the answer already

Consider these goal areas



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- To advocate for own sensory needs or health needs
- To share information
- To increase turns within an interaction
- To increase frequency of initiation
- To participate in self-selected, shared interactions or activities with aided language is used
- To gain attention of others
- To ask for the addition of vocabulary to their communication device so they can talk about whatever they like

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Goals : Self advocacy, protesting

**WANT
STOP**

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What goals help move towards
authentic communication?

Given unrestricted access to high and low tech AAC, STUDENT will request, indicate preference, comment, ask questions, answer questions, and socialize using multimodal communication including spoken language, AAC, gesture, facial expression, and body language within the natural environment on 60% of teacher reported opportunities.

Goal example from Rachel Dorsey, SLP

Strategies for connection



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- Show a genuine interest in what your learner has to communicate.
- Respond quickly when your learner initiates, no matter how they communicate –communication device, pointing to pictures, leaning in...
- Respond consistently as well. This helps reinforce that you will continue to value their messages.
 - I hear you. I see you. You are important. What you say and think is important to me.
- Remember, nothing is more motivating than being understood.

Strategies for connection



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- Embrace student interests. We can bring these into most learning opportunities to encourage engagement if our learners have a restricted range of preferences.
- Model with the intent to connect. Most of our communication is about social closeness and exchanging information, not making requests. This is a natural reason to model language.
- Model language on the AAC device without expectations of any response from the learner. This helps us understand the experience of the AAC user and learn their system.
- Use AAC to talk for real reasons, the same things the kids in your classrooms would be talking about.

Strategies for connection



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- When children are young, provide time for babbling exploring their voice. We encourage and respond to their sounds and all of their words with enthusiasm.
- We assume communication is intentional before there is PROOF that it is.
 - “Assume intention to teach intention” Kate Ahern
- Let kids communicate on their own terms, on their own agenda, before having any expectations that the child will communicate on another person’s agenda
- Offer low pressure environments
- Give many opportunities for kids to watch without having to participate

Strategies for connection



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- Keep the themes and activities age-respectful. The activities, books and songs that are awesome in grade 2 are not the same as for learners in grade 10.
- It is important to give the AAC user our full attention during the interaction. Focus on the learner and the context you are communicating in, so that you can try to connect the message they make to that context. If we only focus on the device, we might not understand the meaning behind what the student is actually sharing.

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- Babbling
- Exploring the keyboard
- Seeing favourite letter and number strings
- May not find the activity engaging
- May have nothing to say

- Communicating in a meaningful activity with peers half an hour later

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Strategies for connection

- Offer low pressure environments where there is a requirement to communicate or a particular focus on that child.
- Give many opportunities for kids to watch without having to communicate so they can see how they will be able to participate later on. This is a valid choice.
- We try to find a way to connect important learning tasks to preferred themes or characters for learners who not naturally engaged in that activity.

Challenges that pop up



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- You didn't understand their message
 - Tell them what you understood and wait for the learner to respond or clarify.
- Your learner isn't communicating expressively much yet
 - Use their communication device or a paper-based version of their communication system to talk to them about what is happening around in their environment. Think about it from the learner's perspective, not the adult's perspective.
 - The more we talk to them with their system, the better.
 - They need as much INPUT in their AAC system's language as possible.

Challenges that pop up



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- Other people might not see your student's abilities yet
 - Keep going anyways!
 - Your learner needs your unwavering support and encouragement.

Believe in
your student;
presume potential.
Chris Bugaj

Some thoughts...



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Recognize the inherent power imbalance between someone who speaks and someone who does not speak.

It is incumbent on those who speak to reduce barriers for participation for learners and others who use AAC.

- Avoid:
 - Over prompting
 - Hand-over-hand
 - Requirement for the learner to communicate



People who use AAC often end up in passive roles in conversations or activities as responders, rather than having active roles. We need to be aware of this and make space, respect and try to avoid assuming we know what they want to say.

Increasing communication throughout the school day



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Communication happens during your activities.



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Increasing communication throughout the school day



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- Engage peers
 - Include paper-based copies of our learners AAC systems so that peers can see and learn how their classmate communicates.
 - Offer the AAC use roles in the classroom that are valued and active. It is important for peers to see that classmates who communicate in different ways
- Follow their lead
 - By taking an interest in what our learners are showing us they enjoy, what they are looking at, what they are listening to, what are enjoy feeling and so on. Sometimes, we can offer MORE of that experience to extend the play which is an important way they learn.
- Shared reading
 - Depending on the intent of reading together, this provides an opportunity for communication partners to model frequently used words (core vocabulary)
 - Social opportunities
 - Literacy experiences are essential for everyone

Keep the communication devices available

Make sure the communication device is out and easily accessible, no matter what the activity is.

If we have to look for the communication device – the moment and opportunity will have passed.

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Increasing communication throughout the school day


- Routines
 - We can think ahead of time and LIST OUT language we want to model with our learners
 - This has the advantage of happening frequently and lends itself to commenting, as well as when things don't go as planned.
- Preferred activities
 - Items we need
 - How we want to do activities
 - Empower learner to direct as possible
 - Demonstrate understanding using descriptive words
- Transition times
 - This is when we often hear students chatting so this is a natural opportunity
 - Asking about what is happening
 - Opinions about what has happened or what will happen
 - Wondering about who we will see

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TL:DR



- Your learner's whole body is giving you communication all the time – use your eyes and ears to gather that info and respond consistently to them.
- Relationship and connection are the foundation of communication, especially with complex communicators.
- Make sure your learner has their communication tools out and accessible all the time. They need to be available whenever anyone else might be able to talk (so all the time).
- Modelling language on your learner's device or communication tool might sound tricky, but the best thing is to just start. Start small. Start with simple, fun messages in activities you enjoy together.



do


you

have

QUESTION ?

question ?

-s



do

do you


have

have

what ? word

questions

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