How to use AAC

A guide to supporting users of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)

Phoenix Learning and Care

Integrated Therapies Team

Speech and Language Therapy Team

What is AAC?

AAC stands for **Alternative and Augmentative Communication**.

When a person uses other ways to communicate instead of, or alongside speaking these **additional methods of communication** are collectively called **AAC**.

Types of AAC include signing, writing, paper-based communication boards and computers or tablet devices using communication packages such as Proloquo2Go.

When a person uses any form of AAC to help them to communicate, they are called **AAC users.**

How can I support an AAC user to communicate?

Anyone who interacts with an AAC user is called a "**communication partner**".

Research shows that communication partners play a **key role** in supporting and developing an AAC users ability to communicate. Great communication partners use **every interaction** with the AAC user as an opportunity to grow language and communication.

Many people feel anxious when they first start trying to communicate with someone who uses AAC. This guide aims to provide some practical advice to family, friends and people supporting AAC users to help them feel more confident communicating with the AAC user.

Tips to be a great AAC communication partners

- Provide **real** and **motivating opportunities** for the AAC user to communicate with others

- Be **persistent** and **don't give up** on communication when it gets tricky

- **Remember** to use the AAC user's communication system **regularly** and **consistently**

- Recognise the importance of **allowing time** for communication to happen, and **wait patiently** for the AAC user to respond

- Make sure that the AAC users alternative communication is **always available** (in the case of electronic AAC this includes making sure it's **visible, in reach, charged and switched on**)

- Understand that AAC users **communicate in many different ways.** AAC users may use a combination of vocalizations, words, sign language, natural gestures, body language, and facial expressions, as well as their AAC systemto communicate.

- Use a variety of **evidence-based techniques** to support the AAC user to use and develop their communication skills *(don't panic – that's why this guide is here to help you!!)*

Supporting AAC users to communicate: Modelling

AAC users need to **learn how to communicate** by using their AAC systems in real conversations.

To do this, their communication partners need to show them how to communicate by **using AAC themselves as they speak.** This is called **modelling**. Modelling simply means that you use the AAC system to talk to the AAC user by pointing to words on their board or device, or signing as you speak. Regular modelling helps the AAC user to learn to use their AAC system to communicate. Modelling might feel difficult at first, but **the more you model, the easier and more natural it will become.**

Here are some tips to get started with AAC modelling:

- Model **regularly** and **consistently**

- Model **key words only** - you **do not** need to model every word you say, just the ones needed to understand a sentence e.g. if you were saying "I like that", you would model "like"

- Model a wide range of communication functions e.g. requesting, but also giving opinions, making comments, etc

- Use a **slower pace** when modelling

- The AAC user may not always respond or reply, **this does not mean that they are not learning**. Keep on modeling!

- You don't need to make the AAC user copy what you modelled – **imitation is not communication!**

See our series of mini guides on modelling language with AAC in daily life for more hints and tips

Supporting AAC users to communicate: Waiting

Using AAC takes time! You need to allow much more time for communication with an AAC user than you would during a spoken conversation.

When it is the AAC users turn to communicate:

- **Pause expectantly-** look toward the AAC user with good eye contact and an open facial expression that invites them to take their turn if they wish to

- **Wait** patiently for the AAC user to respond

- Give **plenty of time** for a message to be composed. It can be a good idea to count in your head for at least 10 seconds. This is a useful strategy to help us to pause

- **Don't show impatience** e.g. through your facial expression, body language or by sighing

- **Don't jump in** with prompts or help until you are sure they need it

PATIENCE IS NOT ABOUT HOW LONG ONE CAN WAIT, BUT HOW WELL ONE BEHAVES WHILE WAITING.

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Supporting AAC users to communicate: Responding

Responding to all communication attempts lets the AAC user know you are listening. It also gives you more chances to model, build and extend language.

Three key responding strategies are:

- **Acknowledge** all attempts at communication. You can do this verbally e.g. by repeating back what they say to show you heard and understood them and non-verbally e.g. nodding or smiling.

- **Attribute meaning -** treat the AAC user's communication as meaningful, even if you don't immediately understand what they are trying to say or know how it's relevant to the conversation

- **Expand** the AAC user's message by adding more detail and vocabulary. For example, if the AAC user says "more", you could model back by asking "YOU WANT MORE?" using their AAC system

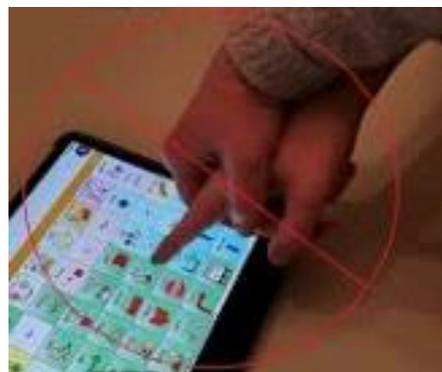# Supporting AAC users to communicate: Prompting

There are two key helpful prompts:

- **Verbal prompts**, such as saying "what do you think?"

- **Gestural prompts**, such as pointing to their AAC system to remind them to use it or pointing to a symbol on their board if they cannot find it.

Verbal and gestural prompts can be useful. However, try to **avoid providing too many prompts**

Another prompt sometimes used is **hand-over-hand** prompting. This is when you take the AAC user's hand and make them point to the word.

Hand-over-hand prompting **does not** help an AAC user to learn to communicate independantly and **should be avoided.**

Techniques to support AAC users to communicate: Creating communication opportunities

- **Routines:** A simple way to start modelling AAC can be to look at everyday routines and consider how you can target particular words

- **Activities:** The best communication happens when we are having fun. When AAC users are motivated and engaged, there are more opportunities to interact. Activities such as sharing books, listening to music or playing games together provide lots of opportunities for communication practice

- **Communication temptations:** Create situations where the AAC user wants to communicate with you, e.g "forget" an item necessary to complete an activity of interest such as the pens for colouring, or place a desired item in sight but out of reach so the AAC user needs to use communciation to request it

See our AAC modelling mini guides for more ideas

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The **Do's** and **Don'ts** of AAC

- **Do** use the AAC system to talk yourself

- **Do** pause and encourage the AAC user to take turns

- **Do** allow plenty of time for AAC user to respond

- **Do** wait patiently

- **Do** focus on modelling key words

- **Do** acknowledge and respond to all forms of communication

- **Do** make sure AAC is accessible ALL day EVERY day

- **Don't** do all the talking

- **Don't** restrict access to the AAC to "talking times"

- **Don't** model every single word you say

- **Don't** use hand over hand to control the AAC user's hand

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For more information please go to:

https://www.phoenixlearningcare.co.uk/therapeutic-support.html