

## Let's Talk About...

# Augmentative and Alternative Communication

## What is augmentative and alternative communication (AAC)?

AAC includes any form of communication that replaces, enhances, or supplements speech. It is used to help children who have difficulty speaking or cannot speak at all. This may include children with autism spectrum disorder, cerebral palsy, apraxia [ay-PRAX-ee-uh] of speech, and other genetic disorders. It is also used to help children with acquired disabilities, such as strokes, brain injuries, or neurodegenerative [nur-oh-dee-GEN-er-ah-tiv] diseases.

## How can it help my child?

AAC can improve your child's ability express their wants, needs, and ideas better. AAC can also benefit family members, friends, caregivers, and community members by providing a way to engage in more meaningful communication with your child.

## How do I know if my child needs AAC help?

Your child will be given a complete AAC evaluation to determine the most appropriate solution for their communication needs. The purpose of the evaluation is to match the features of a communication system with your child's strengths and unique skills.

Anyone can come to the AAC clinic. Before you come, it is helpful if your child has been evaluated by a trained specialist. The specialist will check your child's ability to complete certain movements and thinking tests. They will also look at your child's ability to understand cause and effect, attempts to communicate, and understand symbols and pictures.



## What kinds of communication tools are used for AAC?

AAC includes aided and unaided communication systems. Unaided systems do not require equipment to communicate. The most common tools include:

- Sign language
- Facial expressions
- Gestures (pointing, reaching, pushing, waving)

Aided systems use equipment to aid in communication. Examples can range from simple, low-tech items like pictures, to more complex, high-tech items like computers that are called speech-generating devices.

See the other side of this handout for more information on the types of communication tools.

## Low-tech communication tools

**Low-tech** refers to things like communication boards, displays, or picture exchange systems. Language is displayed using pictures, photographs, objects, textures, letters, words, symbols, or any combination of these things.

Low-tech communication tools can help children who are just beginning to recognize abstract concepts (things like success, freedom, good, bad) as shown in illustrations and pictures. It's also good for children who are sensitive to, or do not respond well to, **auditory feedback** (the process of speaking, listening, and correcting).

A low-tech device can complement a high-tech device or act as a back-up system. Low-tech devices are easy to obtain and inexpensive.

## High-tech communication tools

**High-tech** tools can be simple or complex. **Simple systems** consist of switches or static devices (like a laptop computer) that offer auditory feedback.

**Complex systems** are computer-based systems that are built specifically for this purpose. They usually have changeable displays and powerful language systems.

For most high-tech AAC devices, language is generated through pictures, symbols, and traditional writing. Pictures or symbols may be used to represent a word, phrase, sentence, or concept. Multiple symbols may be combined and used to represent a longer phrase or sentence.

## Direct selection and scanning

**Direct selection** means your child can access the device directly by using their hands. Sometimes a keyguard is needed to help prevent mistakes. A child who can't use direct selection because of physical limitations typically uses **scanning**. Scanning uses switches or an eye-gaze system to communicate.

## How do I know which tool is best for my child?

The communication tools recommended for your child will depend on their sensory, motor, language, endurance, and cognitive levels. A good match will help your child to communicate with others to the best of their potential.

Things to consider when working with the AAC care team include portability (how easy it is to take with you), battery life, and overall durability. Other things to consider include the availability of technical assistance, ease of programming, and the machine's capacity to change and adjust depending on the needs of the user.

### Notes

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**To refer a child you feel would benefit from augmentative and alternative communication please call Primary Children's Rehabilitation at: 833-577-3422**

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