

What Is Augmentative and Alternative Communication?

1

Definitions

Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) is often considered a subset of “assistive technology.” *Assistive technology* is defined by the Tech Act (PL 100-407, 1988) as “any item, piece of equipment, or product system, whether acquired commercially, off the shelf, modified, or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities.” *Augmentative communication*, as explained by King (1999), is a subset of assistive technology that deals with support and/or replacement of natural speaking, writing, and other communication capabilities that do not fully meet the communicator’s needs. AAC then is an inclusive term for any system that facilitates communication with techniques, strategies, equipment, or other resources to support an individual’s expressive communication.

Not all AAC systems include high-tech or high-priced solutions to support the communication of challenged speakers. Basic types of systems are described in the following pages as “high tech” or “low tech,” but in reality, there are often no clear demarcations between these systems. What is new and relatively “high tech” today will be eclipsed by the technology of the future. For example, few of us consider handheld calculators as “high tech,” yet they were not commonly available 30-40 years ago. Another familiar trend is that the cost of items declines as the items gain market share and the technology is used in a wider variety of equipment. Handheld calculators with fewer capabilities than our current models originally sold for more than \$200 when they were first introduced.

Types of Systems

Some examples of traditional systems include sign language and gestures, Bliss symbols, picture point systems, and choice making (i.e., selecting between actual items or representations of them). Current systems run a wide gamut from low-tech systems without voice output to high-tech systems with multiple-voice selections and fully customized vocabulary systems.

- non-speaking systems
- low-tech voice-output systems
- high-tech voice-output systems

Chapter 3: Assessment of Non-Speaking Communicators

If the client has motoric challenges, the observation can serve as a time to identify movements the individual can make independently and consistently. Watch for and note movements the client appears to have control over. These movements may suggest switch access sites if the individual is unable to access a device by direct selection. Note whether the individual is able to point or hold a pencil or other instrument and release it without difficulty. All of these movements will become more important when the client attempts to use a communication system.

Generally, for the initial evaluation, it may be helpful to remove the individual from a group situation to a more controlled, less stimulating environment where he can focus on the tasks presented. If the client has a caregiver who knows him well, it may be beneficial to have the caregiver in the room to answer questions or interpret the individual's responses.

Consider each of the areas addressed by the feature-match system explained on page 46. Not all will need to be directly evaluated. By establishing certain parameters (e.g., the individual can access by direct selection), you will be able to move forward without assessing related skills (e.g., the individual's ability to use switches). The goal of using the assessment kit and objects and activities that the individual finds motivating is to determine whether (and how) this person can access communication technology and use it with purpose as an adjunct to his current communication system.

Augmentative communication evaluations begin in various places and take on different characteristics depending on the cognitive and communicative level of the client. As you look at the general functioning level of the client, you will narrow your focus to features that are truly functional for that client.

Hands-On Evaluation

- switch users vs. direct selection
- beginning communicators—no known reinforcers
- beginning communicators—known reinforcers
- communicators—no effective system
- communicators with system—needing more advanced system
- areas of assessment
 - communication environments
 - matching tools and technology
 - communication devices in the hands of a first time user

Chapter 5: Intervention Strategies for Effective Communication

caregiver needs to learn to wait for the individual to make a communicative attempt toward the specified targets before presenting the reinforcement.

Despite the fact that augmentative communication, in the minds of the evaluation and implementation teams, opens avenues of communication to non-speaking individuals, caregivers may not be as receptive to this technology initially. They are often concerned that the professional staff is “giving up” on verbal speech production and feel yet another sense of “loss” about their loved one. Parents and caregivers need to be educated about the need to develop language skills even if speech production is not continuing. They need to also be aware that there is no evidence showing that introduction of augmentative communication systems impedes speech production, but rather there are studies to the contrary on this point (Goosens 1989). If the caregivers are hesitant to use the device at home but do not object to classroom use, begin there. One way to promote the use of technology at home is to have the individual use it to communicate items that he could not understand previously.

Care providers may need specific training and modeling to understand how to wait and reinforce as this will be a different behavior for many of them. They may need help understanding that by waiting, they will begin to promote independence and communication in the individual, and that they will be assisting in his life-long learning. Once the caregivers perceive that they help the individual more by waiting than by doing, they become some of the best implementers in the environment because of the amount of one-on-one time they typically have with the user.

Strategies

1. Reinforcement inventory

It is necessary to determine objects and activities that the individual enjoys to motivate him to participate in the activity. Observing what the person enjoys, asking caregivers questions, and/or presenting a variety of stimuli for each of the senses to determine preferences and reactions are all ways of determining what the individual may enjoy.

- reinforcement inventory
- establishing an access mode
- symbol associations
- replacing behaviors with alternate communications

Some individuals will attempt to direct or control their larger environments (e.g., the entire classroom), but others will choose to impact only their own corner of the world. For example, the user may enjoy controlling music on a headset but not enjoy turning on music for the entire class. Another individual may be willing to activate a switch to pour the cereal into his bowl, but he won't participate in group cooking activities by pouring ingredients into the mixing bowl. For these reasons, especially

Team Meeting

Date: _____

Team Members Present

Team Members Absent

Group Roles Assigned

Facilitator: _____

Recorder: _____

Timekeeper: _____

Agenda

Time Limit

1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		

Actions

Person(s) Responsible

Timeline

1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		