

## AAC IN THE HOME

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When AAC strategies, systems or devices are recommended for implementation with a family member (e.g., a child or a spouse), involvement of all communication partners in all settings is very important. If AAC is not implemented in the settings where it is needed, and if it is not supported by significant others, its use and effectiveness will remain limited. However, implementing AAC can be a daunting task – it can feel like having to learn a whole new language! It may feel like your home is being ‘taken over’ by pictures or photographs – talk about a drastic make-over! When implementing AAC at home, it is important to only work on one hard thing at a time. In this way, you will avoid being overwhelmed and giving up altogether. It is also important that AAC is much more than pictures and devices. These mean nothing if there is nobody to talk to and nothing to talk about! Herewith are a few tips and strategies that may assist you or confirm that you are already doing many things that help your family member to communicate. Please note that these tips and strategies focus primarily on beginning communicators. With persons who have more advanced skills, the support strategies that are typically employed by families tend to become more individualized and specific.



### Keep the communication going

Family members are usually the people who know the person in need of AAC best. You will be able to ‘read’ many cues the person gives, and be able to tell what the person needs or wants, or how he/she feels. Sometimes we react ‘automatically’ or almost subconsciously to such cues. To become more aware of the communication process that is happening, it can be helpful to follow these four steps:

- **Observe:** Take time to observe any subtle cues the person is giving you that could be meaningful. In order to do this, we sometimes need to stand back a bit, and allow the person time to act, rather than doing things for him.
- **Describe:** Tell the person what you are observing, for example, “I see you are looking at the door”. In this way, the person becomes aware of his actions and realizes that these actions can be used to communicate.
- **Confirm:** Tell the person what you think he is trying to say, for example “You want to go out – is that right?” If the person is able, allow him to confirm whether you have interpreted the behaviour correctly.
- **Respond:** Once you have ensured that you have understood the message, respond as appropriate. NB: This does not always mean you have to give the person everything he asks for! If the person asks to go outside and it is too cold, tell him, “I know you want to go outside, but not now. We will go out later”.

## **Create communication opportunities**

If a person seems very passive, and does not seem to initiate communication, creating opportunities for communication can help. Some specific strategies that can be used include:

### **Choice making**

If you are unsure as to whether a person is able to make a choice, it is recommended to start with choices between something which you know the person really likes (e.g., Coke) and something which he feels neutral about (e.g., milk). The person can be taught to reach or point to the option which he prefers. It is important though that the person always be given the consequence of his choice, so if the person points to the milk, he should be given a sip of it, even though you know he would have preferred the Coke. In this way, the person learns that his actions have specific consequences.

Incorporate choice-making into all daily activities, such as choices of food and drink during mealtime, choices of what to wear, choices of toys, choices of activities, or even choices as to who should help the person with a specific activity (e.g., “Should Mommy or Daddy feed you?”). Initially choices can be presented by having the person point to or reach for the real object. Later on, symbols can be used (e.g., photographs or line drawings) to represent the choices. Start with offering choices between two options, and then expand to more.

### **Making desired items inaccessible**

If the person is able to do many things for himself (e.g., help himself to food in the fridge), there is less need to communicate. By making desired items inaccessible, an opportunity is created for the person to ask for help. A very effective strategy for children who are just starting to communicate intentionally would be to put a desired item (e.g., a cookie) in a tightly closed see-through plastic container. The child can thus see the cookie, but cannot reach it. The child can be prompted to point to a picture for ‘cookie’ or ‘open’ or produce the manual sign for ‘open’ or ‘help’ in order to request for the container to be opened.

### **Providing small portions or brief turns**

Another way of eliciting requests is to only provide small portions of desired food, drinks or materials. The person might be given only one raisin, and can be helped to produce the manual sign for ‘more’ before getting another one. Instead of providing all the puzzle pieces at once, they can be given one by one, as the person asks for each one. Providing brief turns of enjoyable activities is a similar strategy. The child might, for example, be swinging. After a few swings, stop the swing and wait for the child to indicate that he wants ‘more’. This might initially be only a body movement or a vocalization, but gradually the child might be taught to use more symbolic ways of communicating, such as graphic symbols or manual signs.

## Learning to use symbols

While body movements and vocalizations can be important ways of communicating, we would typically want to expand a person's communication repertoire to include ways that are more easily understandable to a variety of partners. Such communication symbols might include manual signs, object symbols, photographs and/or line drawings. Herewith some tips on learning symbols:

### Choosing vocabulary

Choose symbol vocabulary that is motivating and meaningful. Depending on the person's abilities, it is recommended to start only with a small pool of words that are highly motivating for the user. Favourite foods or activities as well as words such as 'more', 'stop' and 'help' that can be used across different contexts might be good options. Your speech language therapist should assist you to select appropriate vocabulary items.

### Input strategies

When learning to use symbols, the person in need of AAC should develop an understanding of the meaning of the symbol. Some strategies to achieve this include:

- **Modeling the use of the symbol in functional situations:** Just like children learn to use words by hearing them spoken in meaningful contexts, AAC symbols need to be modeled in functional situations so that the person can come to understand what the symbol means. So, if the child should learn the meaning of photographs representing favourite toys, show him the photograph while telling him the meaning of it before that particular toy is played with, such as (showing the photograph of a ball): "Ball. We are going to play with the ball" (then play with the ball). If an adult is learning to associate a photograph of the television with watching TV, expose the person to the photograph before switching on the TV.
- **Schedules:** These are particularly useful in teaching the meaning of so-called *aided* symbols, such as objects, photographs and line drawings.

### Output strategies

Symbol output should also be prompted. Communication opportunities as discussed above can be created and the use of specific symbols can be prompted. Some specific prompts that can be given are:

- **Questions and request**, such as 'What do you want?' 'Tell me where you want to go.'
- **Incomplete sentences**, such as 'We are now going to go for a .....
- **Expanding** what the person has communicated, and requesting **repetition**, for example:
  - Child: Shows 'more' with a manual sign
  - Parent: "You want **more. More juice.**" (while using manual signs)

for 'more' and juice'). Can you tell me **more juice?**

- **Physical assistance:** The person can be physically assisted to point to a picture, press a button on a speech generating device or perform a manual sign.

## **Practicalities...**

The easier it is for you to incorporate AAC symbols, strategies and devices into the daily routine, the more likely you will use them. When using aided symbols (i.e., symbols that are not produced by the user's body, such as objects, photographs or line drawings), one clue is to make sure appropriate symbols are **easily accessible** in the relevant situations. Symbols might be kept with the relevant objects and activities. For example, food symbols could be stuck onto the fridge and symbols representing toys could be kept in a toy cupboard. Loose symbols can easily be displayed (e.g., for making choices) by being stuck with Velcro on a car mat.

Symbols such as 'more', 'help' and 'stop' that can be used across different contexts should be kept at hand constantly. They could be fixed to a person's lap tray, displayed on a portable communication board or in a communication booklet. Eventually, all symbols should be available to the person at all times, as he/she learns to communicate about a variety of topics that go beyond the immediate context. If an electronic communication aid is used, it is a good idea to get into a routine that ensures that the device is charged and available at strategic points throughout the day.

**Making aided symbols available** can be quite a time-consuming task. It might help to try to set aside a specific time regularly (e.g., weekly or monthly) to create and update a family member's communication system. A list of vocabulary items to be added might be kept until there is time to make or programme the specific symbols to be added. Photographs can be obtained from magazines, downloaded from the internet or produced using a camera or mobile phone and a colour printer. All paper-based communication aids will last longer if covered by see-through contact plastic or laminated. Teamwork is essential to get consensus as to what vocabulary should be added and how it should be organized.

## **Expanding communication beyond the home**

### **Remnant book**

One strategy to expand communication to more partners is the use of a remnant book. Small objects, pictures and photos that are related to specific events in which the person using AAC participated are collected and displayed in a book. For example, a serviette with a logo may be collected from a visit to McDonalds. A chocolate wrapper may be a remnant from a visit to granny (who gave everyone a chocolate), and an empty syringe may be collected from a doctor's visit. Once the remnant is glued to a page, an instruction is written for a communication partner. For example, "Ask me where we went on Saturday" (written next to the McDonald's serviette). A communication partner can now ask this question, and the person with LNFS can point to the 'remnant' in reply. If the person with LNFS can respond to 'yes/no' questions, a few follow-up yes/no questions can be added, such as 'Ask me whether I had a milkshake. Ask me whether I liked it.' (Refer to Chapter 4 for more information on

remnant books.) Some apps also allow for 'Talking Photo Albums' to be created which may be used in a similar way as the remnant book.

### ***Communication dictionary***

The different ways in which the person with LNFS communicates may not always be easily understood by outsiders. A communication dictionary can help to make these different ways of communicating known to people outside the family.

### **A final word...**

Supporting a family member with little or no functional speech takes much effort and can at times feel quite overwhelming. It is important that, as a family, you get support and help for this task. A professional with AAC knowledge who supports you on a regular basis might be needed. This should be a person who you trust and who understands your goals and priorities for your loved one. 'Informal' support from friends, family and neighbours can be just as important. Maybe they can assist with some tasks, or simply spend some time with the person with LNFS, or give you a chance to take a rest. Sometimes the best thing you can do for your family member is to make sure you 'recharge your batteries'. Family support groups where you can meet and interact with families who are in similar situations can also be helpful.

### **References**

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- Bornman, J. (1998). It takes two to interact and also a few other skills. *Clinica: Applications in Clinical Practice in Communication Pathology, Monograph, 3*, 37-47.