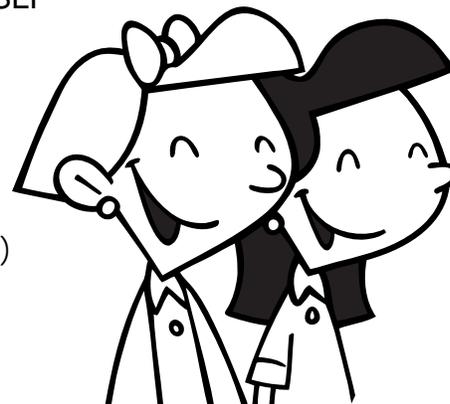# Augmentative and Alternative Communication: Frequently Asked Questions

By Cheris Frailey, M.A., CCC-SLP

Parents and educators may become overwhelmed when working with a child who is nonverbal or has some form of unintelligible speech. Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) is an option for assisting with the communication skills of these children. Below are common questions and answers to guide in learning about AAC.

What is AAC?

AAC refers to methods of communicating that do not involve direct speech from an individual. These methods include gestures, facial expressions, writing, sign language, Morse code, communication aids (charts, informational bracelets, language boards), and electronic devices.

What is the difference between AAC and Assistive Technology?

Assistive Technology (AT) is a broad term referring to assistive, adaptive, and rehabilitative devices that assist an individual to function in society at a more appropriate and independent level. AT includes wheelchairs, ramps, and TTYs (phone system for individuals that are deaf). AAC is only one component of AT.
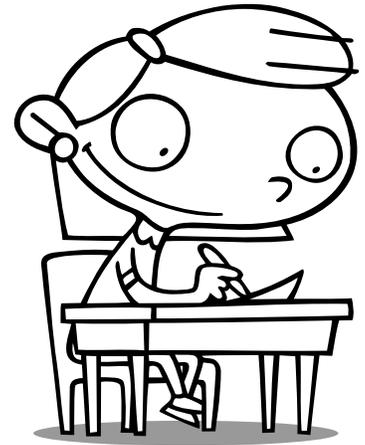
What is an AAC System vs. an AAC Device?

An AAC system encompasses all methods of communication. This includes facial expressions, manual gestures, possible speech or vocalizations, picture symbols, electronic devices, as well as strategies and skills used in a variety of communication situations.

An AAC device is a mechanical or electronic tool that assists in communication. Examples include picture symbols, communication boards, and computer devices. An AAC device may or may not be part of an AAC system.

Why do individuals use AAC?

Individuals use AAC to enable them to better communicate. It allows individuals to share information, develop relationships, express feelings, ask questions, and make their needs and wants known. Individuals who use AAC devices may be nonverbal, have poor intelligibility, or may need visual cues to assist with verbalization.

Can regular education students use AAC?

Use AAC in the preschool classroom or with ESL students as they learn new vocabulary through the use of picture symbols.

What is the hierarchy for teaching words to an AAC user?

The hierarchy for teaching communication with an AAC user is objects, photographs, symbols, and then words.

How do I find someone to evaluate and assist my child with AAC?

Locate a Speech-Language Pathologist in your area. Call local hospitals, private practices, or visit www.asha.org for a listing of specialists. Some questions to ask are: Do you provide services in the area of AAC? What type of experience do you have with AAC? What will happen after the evaluation? Where can I go to see equipment and individuals using devices? If you recommend a device for my child, will you assist in finding funding or guide me in the direction of funding?

AAC Resources

International Society for Augmentative and Alternative Communications: www.isaac-online.org

Rehabilitation Engineering and Assistive Technology Society of North America: www.resna.org

AAC Intervention: www.aacintervention.com

Resources

Glennen, Sharon, L. and DeCoste, Denise, C. (1997). Handbook of Augmentative and Alternative Communication, Singular Publishing Group, Inc.

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association Division 12, *Perspective on Augmentative and Alternative Communication.* Volume 14, Number 1, April 2005.

Introduction to Augmentative and Alternative Communication