Helping your Child Communicate
with their AAC system
(Augmentative and Alternative Communication)

Communication Partner Strategies

Provided by Orange County Public Schools
Assistive Technology Team
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We're excited that your child has received a communication system either for trial or permanent placement. First step accomplished! Yay!! ☺

Now it's important that the school team and your family work together to help your child become a successful communicator in lots of environments.

A key predictor of success with an augmentative and alternative communication system (AAC), **is having good communication partners**.

That includes the school team and family, that's why we're sharing this information with you!

Topics include:
- Having a communication system available
- Modeling communication with pictures
- Interpreting non-verbal signals and responding with messages on the AAC system
- Communication beyond requesting and labeling
- Creating communication opportunities
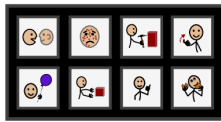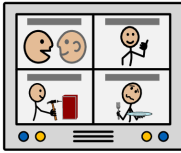
Having the Communication System Always Available

For your child to learn how to use their AAC system, he/she needs to have access to it. So **keep it available** as much as possible.

Don't expect your child to instantly be an effective communicator. There may have been some initial success, however there likely still is a lot to learn.

When your child doesn't use messages appropriately, it may be tempting to take their device away for a while. But keep in mind that they are learning, and they learn from their mistakes too. When a verbally speaking child makes social mistakes, we provide feedback such as "please don't talk while I'm talking" or "we're not talking about that right now, we're talking about XXX."

Think about these things:
- To teach social rules we all follow, provide feedback to your child similar to what you would say if a speaking child did the same thing
- If there are situations when the system wouldn't be appropriate (ex. in the pool/bath time, on the playground), what back up system can be used?
  - A laminated paper based picture communication system can be a backup. Your child's school team can help with this.
  - This back up system is also a good option if the electronic system isn't available (out for repair, needs charging, etc.)

Modeling communication with pictures – Aided Language

One of the easiest and **most important strategies** for communication partners is aided language or modeling. This technique involves pointing to pictures on the AAC system while you talk with the AAC user. Children who use AAC have very few AAC users as models. We need to show them what it looks like to use their system by using it ourselves.

What does it look like?
- Communication partner points to symbols on the AAC system as they speak, many times throughout the day
- You don't have to model every word you say, just the key words

What are the benefits?
- You can get familiar with the location of vocabulary on the device
- Children get to see and learn new language on their communication systems during everyday situations

Things to remember:
- AAC users need to spend a lot of time with people that "speak AAC"
- It may take **many times** of modeling a targeted word or phrase before your child begins to use it on his/her own
- When we model we can "invite" a response from the child but we don't require one.
- Using an AAC system is similar to learning a new language. Communication partners modeling messages provides immersion in "speaking AAC" and will help your child learn.

To help build language, you can model an extension of what was communicated. For example:

Child communicates	You say and model (words in **ALL CAPS** are the words that the communication partner would model on the AAC system as they are spoken)
tv	Let's **WATCH TV**
more	Do you **WANT MORE** juice
don't	You **DON'T WANT** that?

Examples of messages to model

Mealtime:	eat, drink, finished, want more, you like?, like that, not like, help, open
Greetings	hi, hello, bye, goodbye, how are you?, I'm (good, happy, fine, ok, sad, mad, etc.)
Social/manners	please, thank you, excuse me, I'm sorry, you're welcome, I don't know
Reading together	like, like that, don't like, don't like that, describing words (big, little, fast, slow, good, bad, happy, sad, mad, etc.)
Going places	go, where?, car, stop, home
Personal care	go, help, turn, put, get, stop, finished, go in, put on, you help, get more
Play time	turn on, go up, want different, look, look here, more, like, like that, not like, you, me, play, help, want help

Video examples of AAC modeling in action:
- Mom and daughter at home: https://youtu.be/Sz41DBj6aUY
- Playing a game: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zXPJeCqmEUw
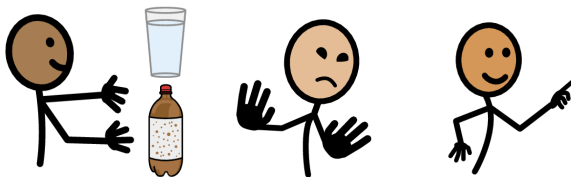
Interpreting non-verbal signals and responding with messages on the AAC system

Children that struggle to talk usually use other ways to communicate what they need to say. They may use facial expressions, gestures, body language, sounds, and sometimes say parts of words. Their parents, family, and close friends know those signals well and often know what he/she is trying to say. We're certain that this is the case at your home too.

To help your child learn to communicate effectively with someone that doesn't know them as well, it's important to interpret those signals and then model messages on the AAC system to match what they are trying to say.

Examples:

If your child	Say and model
Reaches toward the refrigerator	You **WANT** something to **DRINK**?
Pushes drink away	You **DON'T WANT** that?
Holds empty cup toward you	Do you want **MORE**?
Laughs at your dog	he's so **FUNNY**
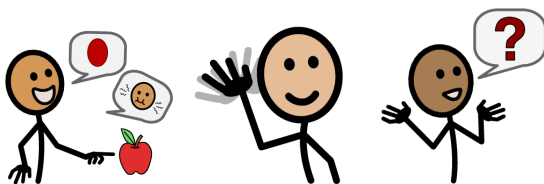
## Encouraging communication beyond requesting and labeling

When children first begin using their AAC systems, everyone is excited for them to be able to show what they know. This can lead to getting stuck in labeling things (answering "what is this?") and requesting things. We call this living in "noun town", and if that's all that is talked about, then the AAC user isn't very interesting to talk with. Both of those skills have their place, but true communication is so much more. When we have conversations we make comments, ask questions, share information, reject/refuse things, express feelings, among other things.

When you and your child's school team decide what words to target, be sure to include a variety of functions of communication.

Examples

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Commenting	fun, wow, like it, don't like it, big/little, hot/cold, mean, nice
Greeting	hi, hello, bye, goodbye, how are you?,
Asking questions	why, where, what, who, when, how, which one
Sharing information	My name is, I'm XX years old, I go to XXX School, I like to XXX, I have a cat named XXX, etc.
Manners	please, thank you, excuse me, I'm sorry, you're welcome, I don't know
Rejecting/refusing	no, no thank you, don't, don't want, stop, not
Expressing feelings	fine, happy, sad, mad, sorry, good, not good, excited, crazy, ok
Physical status	sick, hot, cold, hungry, thirsty, tired
Calling to people	Hey, come here, look
Directing other's	come here, sit down, sit here, throw away, read it, get it, go away
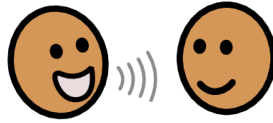
Creating opportunities for communication

Because AAC users have struggled to communicate, without realizing it, family, friends, and teachers might change the way they communicate with them. They may limit conversations to asking just yes/no questions or asking questions that have a one word answer to make it easier for children to respond.

Now it's time to try to break those habits and have better conversations that make everyone feel more socially connected.

Instead of	Try this
Do you want chocolate milk?	Let me know what you **WANT** to **DRINK**
Are you sad?	How do **YOU** feel?
Do you want me to read the book?	I wonder **WHAT** we should **DO**
(Being ready to help)	Let me know if you **NEED HELP**
Do you like it?	**WHAT** do **YOU** think about that?
Tell her your name	She would probably like to know **MORE** about **YOU**. Would **YOU** like to share?
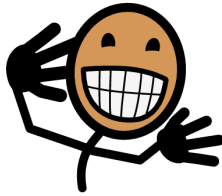
Most important of all…

Keep communication fun!

We don't communicate to quiz or test each other. Sure… we do want your child to be able to show what he/she knows, but more importantly, we want to develop communication that helps to connect with people, to have friends, and feel close to others.

Learning to communicate effectively is a journey, not a destination. As adults we all still have things to learn. So as you encourage your child on this journey, be yourselves, be silly, be real!

On Facebook there's a family that shares about their creative, fun days with their daughter who is an AAC user. You can look for **AAC Family Fun and join their group.

Reference: Helping Your Child Communicate with AAC – One Kids Place