

Augmentative and Alternative Communication

Everyone needs to communicate. We communicate with others to exchange ideas and to express feelings like happiness and sadness. Communication is also necessary to express your desires or wants and needs. Not everyone communicates in the same way.

What is communication?

Communication is the exchanging of information, in some way---whether talking, gesturing, writing or using a communication board or device. Talking is probably the fastest and easiest for most; however, if an individual is unable to use his/her voice to communicate, then an alternative method of communication is needed. If individuals are not given a chance to communicate their wants and needs, they may develop some "inappropriate behaviors." Behavior, whether appropriate or not, is a form of communication!

What is augmentative and alternative communication?

- Very simply, it is communicating without the use of your voice.
- It includes facial expressions, body language, gestures, pictures, and electronic devices.
- Think about how babies communicate (body movements, facial expressions, gestures, crying, etc.).
- Everyone (with or without disabilities) uses some form of AAC: body language, gestures, facial expressions, writing.
- People with severe disabilities may need other AAC, like communication boards or electronic devices, because body movements of people with disabilities might be different or impaired, their gestures or body language may be different.

When is a communication device needed?

- The type or style of communication depends on the audience (to a parent, teacher, friend) and what is being communicated.
- The communication device needs to be available/accessible at all times to be used effectively.
- Communication devices can be used for habilitative and rehabilitative purposes to teach conversation skills, language, vocabulary, and speech.
- Using a communication device can be a temporary part of life, for instance regaining speech after an accident, or it may be permanent.

Things to consider when choosing a communication device:

- An individual's needs and abilities should be considered.
- Will a communication board or augmentative (electronic) device be best?
- Communication boards can be simple (2 pictures) to complex (many pages), no speech output, inexpensive.
- Augmentative devices can have speech output, be hooked up to computers and telephones, can be expensive.

More things to consider:

- Is it easy to program?
- Type of speech, digitized or synthesized?
- Size of the keys, is a keyguard necessary?
- Size and weight of the device, as communication develops will the capabilities of machine increase? How much memory does it have?
- Type of warranty, lease program available?
- Is there a spelling mode, for spontaneous communication?
- Is there support available from the company on how to use the device, and what happens when it needs to be repaired?
- Is funding available?

Communication in the classroom:

Using a communication device takes time, lots of time, and patience by everyone -- user, teacher, other students. Here are some hints that might be helpful:

- Plan ahead by sending 2 or 3 questions home with the student to prepare for the next class.

- Record essays, reports, and poems in AAC device so the student can share his/her work like everyone else.
- Encourage the use of the device by allowing for response time during lessons.
- Encourage the use of the device during free time or recess.
- Utilize group work on an assignment to further encourage student use of the device.
- Integrate speech therapy into the classroom to help keep the device current.

Resources for Augmentative Alternative Communication

AbleNet, Inc.

1081 10th Ave. S.E.
 Minneapolis, MN 55414-1312
 800-322-0956
www.ablenetinc.com

Adaptivation, Inc.

224 S.E. 16th St., Ste. 2
 Ames, IA 50010
 800-723-2783
www.adaptivation.com

Prentke Romich Co.

1022 Heyl Rd.
 Wooster, OH 44691
 800-262-1984
www.prentrom.com

DynaVox Mayer-Johnson (formerly Sentient Systems Technology, Inc.)

2100 Wharton St., Ste. 630
 Pittsburgh, PA 15203
 866-396-2869
www.dynavoxtech.com

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