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Stages of Development in AAC Competence

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Moderated by:
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Stages of Development in AAC Competence

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Learning Outcomes

- Explain how and why to determine level of skills using AAC.
- Define levels of functioning in individuals who use AAC.
- Describe the importance of using levels of functioning in evaluation and treatment planning.

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Stages of Development & Levels of Functioning

- In verbal children, standardized tests, developmental norms and knowledge of how communication skills develop are typically used to determine an approximate age level or point of development where a child is functioning.
- These tools are also used to provide a guideline for selecting objectives for therapy and provide a direction and sequence to achieving age appropriate or functional communication skills.
- When a child is non-verbal and uses AAC to communicate, what do you use to help determine levels of functioning?
- What do you use as a guideline for choosing appropriate goals?

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Communicative Competence

- Communicative competence is the ultimate goal for individuals who use AAC.
- Communicative competence with AAC consists of four areas
 - Operational
 - Linguistic
 - Social
 - Strategic
- These four areas of communicative competence can be used as a guideline for figuring out levels of functioning of AAC users.

Light, J. (1989)

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Determining Levels

- It is not usually possible to administer standardized tests to individuals who use AAC
- Additionally, developmental norms for language and speech development don't necessarily "fit" individuals whose receptive language is based on both verbal and symbolic language, whose expressive language is primarily symbol based and whose pragmatic skills are impacted by their communication modality.
- So, how do we determine levels of functioning for individuals who use AAC?
 - Observations
 - Checklists
 - Reports by communication partners (e.g., family, peers)

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What are the levels of functioning in AAC?

- Emergent Communicator
- Wants-Needs Communicator
- Context-Cue Communicator
- Transitional Communicator
- Independent Communicator

RESOURCES

**Tobii DynaVox Dynamic AAC Goals Grid 1 and 2

**Classification system for individuals with aphasia developed by Garrett and Beukelman (1992;1998; revised in 2005)

**Adaptations to levels of functioning made based on my professional experience

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LEVEL ONE COMMUNICATOR – Emerging Communicator

- Individual relies primarily on non-symbolic communication
- May not understand power/purpose of communication
- May not understand symbolic communication
- Language precursors such as joint attention, imitation and turn taking may also be significantly delayed or impaired
- None to minimal use of language for social communication

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continued

Questions About an Emerging Communicator

Always
someone just
introduced
to AAC?

Always
someone with
cognitive
impairments?

Always a
young child?

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continued

Video: Emerging Communicator

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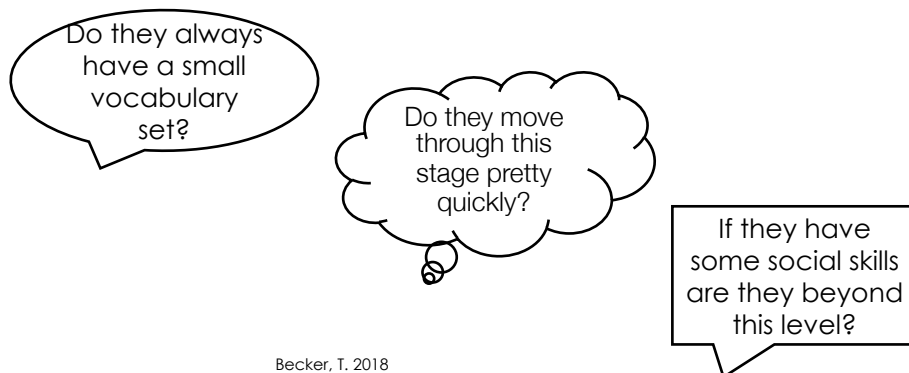
LEVEL TWO COMMUNICATOR: Wants/needs Communicator

- Vocabulary consists of basic symbols – usually nouns and verbs
- Uses symbols to make choices and meaningful requests of objects or actions
- Typically do not combine symbols to make a phrase or sentence
 - If they do combine symbols, it is typically “want” + desired object or action
- Typically do not use symbols to interact socially with others, only for wants/needs
- Typically do not use strategic competency skills
- Operational skills limited to basic system operation (e.g. finding and selecting desired symbols)

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Questions About Wants-Needs Communicators



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Video: Wants-Needs Communicator

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LEVEL THREE COMMUNICATOR: Beginning of Context-Cue Communicator

- Vocabulary increases to include several nouns and verbs.
 - May also use basic pronouns, most likely "I" and "You"
- Can combine symbols to make short, basic utterances.
 - Typically routine utterances used on a regular basis
- Can answer routine questions appropriately with familiar communication partners
- Beginning to use symbolic language for social purposes such as...
 - Greetings and farewells
 - Routine comments (e.g., "I like this," "fun," "yuck")
- Strategic competency skills are likely starting to emerge. Emerging skills could include skills such as...
 - Recognizing communication breakdowns
 - Repeating a message when communication partner does not respond
- Operational competency skills are developing and could include skills such as...
 - Turning on/off
 - Transporting AAC system across environments
 - Adjusting volume
 - Increasing efficiency and accuracy of finding desired symbols.



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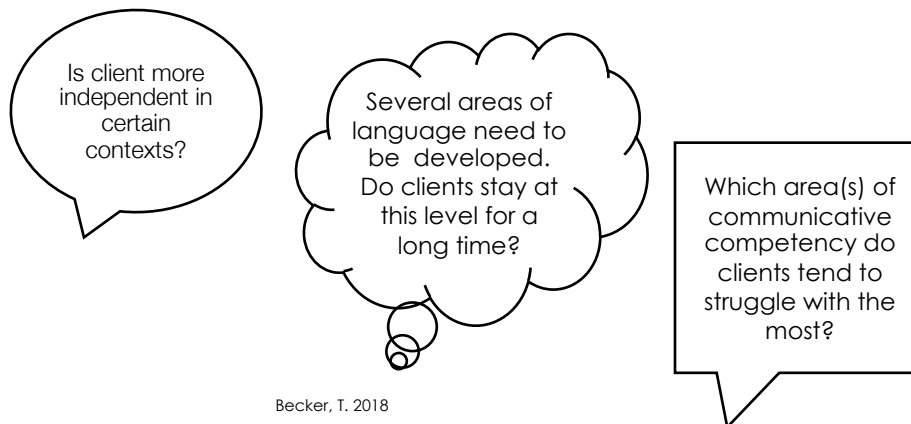
LEVEL FOUR COMMUNICATOR: Context-Cue Communicator

**Solidifying skills from level three. Still relies on context and cues for support.

- In general: uses communication for a variety of purposes (make statements, answer questions, ask questions, social communication)
- Combines symbols to make a variety of utterances of varying length
- Grammaticality of sentences is improving
- Appropriately answers questions with limited support from communication partners.
- Starting to ask questions
- Produces socially appropriate comments
- Participates in basic, structured conversations with familiar partners
- Occasionally recognizes communication breakdowns and uses simple repair strategies

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Questions About Context-Cue Communicators



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Video Context-Cue Communicator

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LEVEL FIVE COMMUNICATOR Transitional Communicator

- **In general:** Becoming more and more independent with skills; language skills are more refined; continued development of social skills; competent with AAC operational skills; Strategic skills appropriate
 - Competently navigates to a variety of vocabulary/symbols
 - Proficient with basic operations of the AAC system
 - Create novel utterances with varied structure and complexity
 - Answers a variety of questions from varied communication partners
 - Becoming more competent in social interactions with familiar partners as conversational skills improve
 - Using repair strategies appropriate to the situation
- Still relying occasionally on cues or context, especially when communicating with unfamiliar or less familiar communication partners.

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LEVEL SIX COMMUNICATOR

Independent Communicator

- Title of this level is pretty self-explanatory...
 - Appropriately uses AAC system to communicate across all environments independently
 - Generally competent across 4 areas of communicative competence – as much as individual abilities allow

Do individuals who use AAC get to this level?

How long does it take an individual to get to this level?

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Will I know enough and provide appropriate therapy to get them to this level?

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continued

How can using levels assist in the evaluation and treatment process

- Provides an ultimate goal and a path to get there
- Encompasses the four competency areas needed for individuals who use AAC to achieve communicative competency
- Provides a way to benchmark skills and allows for progress monitoring
- Offers an alternative way to assess individuals who may be difficult to evaluate using “typical” measures
- Assists with goal selection as it provides a hierarchy of skills

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In summary...

- Determining levels of functioning/stages of development for AAC is based on tracking an individual's path towards communicative competence
- Communicative competence using AAC is different than competencies needed for individuals who use speech as primary method of communication
- Ultimately, having “levels” to assign an individual allows for SLPs to better assess, track progress and develop goals that will lead to a well-rounded and proficient communicator

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Resources

- Becker, T. & Schneider, H. (2010). Selecting, Implementing and Monitoring AAC Goals for Communicative Success. Presented at ATIA.
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- Garrett, K., & Beukelman, D.R. (1992). Augmentative communication approaches for persons with severe aphasia. In K. Yorkston (Ed.) *Augmentative communication in the medical setting* (pp. 245-338). Tucson, AZ: Communication Skill Builders.
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- Light, J. & Binger, C. (1998). *Building Communicative Competence with Individuals Who Use Augmentative and Alternative Communication*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Company.
- Schneider, H. & Clarke, V. (2009, 2010). A Dynamic AAC Goals Planning Guide: Addressing Competence across Ability Levels. Presented at ASHA, 2009 and ISAAC, 2010.

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