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Back to Basics: Low-tech AAC Options and Strategies for Use in the Classroom

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Low-tech AAC Options and Strategies for Use in the Classroom

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Learning Outcomes

After this course, participants will be able to:

▪ Identify three benefits of augmentative communication.
▪ Identify three low-tech communication options that can be used with students with disabilities.
▪ Identify three strategies for using low-tech communication in the classroom.
Definition of AAC  
(augmentative and alternative communication)

- ASHA: Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) refers to an area of research, clinical, and educational practice. AAC involves attempts to study and when necessary compensate for temporary or permanent impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions of individuals with severe disorders of speech-language production and/or comprehension, including spoken and written modes of communication.
- Special devices and methods of communication which enhance or provide alternatives for spoken language.

Aided vs. Unaided

Unaided Communication Includes:
- Unspoken means of natural conversation (gestures, body language facial expressions)
- Manual signs and Sign Language

Aided Communication Includes:
- Anything that includes external support
  - Communication board with symbols
  - Computers
  - Handheld devices or tablets that generate speech
Benefits of Augmentative Communication (AAC)

- Can enhance expressive and receptive language development
- May reduce frustration and decrease behavior as it provides an alternative means of communication
- Promotes personal empowerment as it allows individuals to control their environment and interact socially
- Increases self confidence and self esteem

Considerations for using AAC

- Current levels of expressive, receptive, pragmatic, and cognitive skills
- Literacy skills (word prediction)
- Recognition of symbolic language (pictures, words, sequencing, categorization, Minspeak)
- Background (history of AAC use, family support & understanding, school/team support)
- Motivation of individual to use AAC
Considerations For Using AAC (cont.)

- Level of physical functioning
- Progressive nature of disability
- Access techniques (direct selection, scanning)
- Portability
- Durability
- Integration with other technologies
- Evaluations and/or trials with multiple devices

Low-Tech AAC Options

- Vocalizations and speech
- Gestures, body language, and sign language
- Eye gaze/eye blink
- Objects
- Photographs
- Picture symbols
- Static communication boards
- Partner Assisted Scanning
- Off the shelf low-tech (paper/pencil, dry erase board, MagnaDoodle, letter bracelets)
- Simple AAC devices
Vocalizations and Speech

- Used for quick, general intent
- Gains attention and should be recognized
- May need to be augmented
- Any speech that is intelligible to all communication partners does not need to be augmented
- Augment speech that is not intelligible to all listeners

Gestures and Body Language

- Conventional gestures - recognized by society as messages with specific meaning
- Body language - postural behaviors and signals that are commonly recognized

**PROS**

- Nothing external required
- Readily available in all environments

**CONS**

- Limited in number and type of messages that may be conveyed
- Limited to ‘here and now’
- Can become a game of ‘20 questions’
- Some physical ability required
Sign Language

Pros
- May be learned more easily with reinforcement specific to a request
- Can communicate extensively if partner is knowledgeable

Cons
- Not universal
- Must have physical skills
- Can be difficult in school setting due to time constraints to teach staff
- Can result in decreased interactions due to lack of knowledge in sign

Eye Gaze/Eye Blink

Pros
- Extremely flexible with positioning (good option when individuals are being physically challenged)
- Fairly quick and easy
- Eye gaze boards are easy to make
- Good to use for quick choices for activities, answers to questions (including academics) when reliable
- Can be used with objects, static pictures, frames, alphabet, hands, initial letters

Cons
- Can be time consuming to obtain spelled or lengthy messages
- May be misinterpreted or difficult to read
- Can become a ‘yes/no’ game
Eye Gaze/Eye Blink (Low Tech Boards)

Options for ‘yes/no’ eye gaze or eye blink

- Once/twice
- Up/down
- Fast/slow
- Right/left (may be paired with words or pictures)
Aided Communication Symbols

- Symbol Continuum
- Symbols range from concrete/easy to understand to more abstract/more difficult to understand
- Real Objects--Photographs--Line Drawings--Words

Objects

- First level of vocabulary representation, more concrete
- Readily available in natural environment
- Allows for immediate reinforcement of actual item
- Offers tactile feedback for visually impaired
- Can be full or partial
  - Regular objects
  - Miniature objects
  - Partial objects
  - Tactile representation
Photographs and Picture Symbols

- Use with objects to teach association
- Encourage use of pictures at home
- Can be photos, magazine pictures, food labels, box labels
- Make tactile
- Make pictures easily accessible (home and school)
- Color or black and white

Picture Symbols

- Many commercially available symbol sets
  - Boardmaker
  - Symbolstix
  - Widgit Symbols
- Symbol sets can vary in:
  - Target audience
  - Color
  - Number of symbols available
  - Pricing for obtaining symbol program
Considerations for Choosing Symbol Sets

- Vision
- Situation/Environment
- Individual preferences
- Age
- Cultural or ethnic influences
- Motor abilities
- Skill Levels

Accessible pictures

- Organize vocabulary by areas of room
- Categorize for easy location and accessibility
- Keep next to Velcro board
- Keep multiple copies of generic and core vocabulary (yes/no, help, more, all done, bathroom)

**Wear them**
- Vests, mitts, aprons
- Can be purchased or made
- Use with Velcro or in slip covers
- Encourages eye contact with communication partner

**Velcro loop fabric**
- Attached to door, back of mirror, walls, foam boards, cardboard, slant boards, cook book holders
Static Pictures and Boards

- Interactive boards
- Allow student to manipulate pictures
- Offer pre-made picture boards for communication
- Pair with device overlays or pages
- Topic specific

Static boards, books & wallets

- Advantages
  - Portable
  - Easy to use
  - Easy to construct

- Disadvantages
  - Requires partners active participation
  - Difficult to accommodate large vocabulary
  - No voice output
Alphabet/Word Boards

- Allow for creation of novel messages
- Can be used with direct selection, eye gaze, or partner assisted scanning
- Can provide a back-up system for device users
- Pre-made boards are available from vendors
- Create books with printed screens from user’s device

Picture Schedules

- Help maintain structure
- Often used with individuals with autism/PDD
- Pictures/words
- Clearly defines daily routine and expectations
- Boardmaker and Tobii SymbolMate have pre-made activity/schedule templates
- Can be low or high tech
- Cross off or remove activities
- Vertical or horizontal
PECS

- Picture Exchange Communication System
- Commonly used with individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders
- Requires training of staff and strict teaching sequence
- Can help teach use of communication devices
- Transition to static pictures on device and then to static overlay

Partner Assisted Scanning

- Offers low-tech practice for auditory scanning
- Allows you to pace to individual’s needs
- Allows you to read facial expressions and body movements without having to rely solely on switch activation
- Offer all the choices first, then cycle through them slowly
- Be careful how much verbal prompting you offer, give time for listening and processing
Voice Output Solutions: Single Message Devices

- Advantages: easy to program, voice output, easy access, can be accessed in a variety of ways (Hand, head, foot, etc.)

- Disadvantages: Anticipation of all communication needs in a situation, limited messages, requires continual active participation by others to program

Single Message Device examples

- BIG Mack Communicator
- LITTLE Mack Communicator
- GoTalk One
- Talking Brix
- Keychain Talker
- Partner Plus
- Big Button Communicator
- Clip talker
- Personal talker
- Mini Com
Single Message Devices: Ideas and Integration

- Repetitive lines
- Two switches for answers/choices
- Initiate communication/request assistance
- Place in classroom available to everyone
- Place associated picture on device
- Encourage initiation, not just responses
- Offer choices for vocabulary

Voice Output Solutions: Sequenced/Random Single Message Devices

- Record a sequence of messages (played sequentially or randomly)
- Device progresses through messages with each activation
- Often used in social situations
Sequence Devices examples

- Italk 2 with levels
- Step by Step Communicator

Sequenced Single Message Devices: Ideas and Integration

- Tell a whole story (individually or as a group)
- Use a variety of the same message (i.e. hello)
- Encourage child initiated interaction with parent/teacher (arriving at school/home)
- Interview peers/persons in the community
- Use randomized devices to:
  - roll dice
  - choose colors
  - pick teammates/teams
  - play games like Simon Says
Voice Output Solutions: 2-8 messages

- Allow for choices
- Require discrimination of pictures or knowledge of message item placement
- Limited vocabulary
- Can help transition from PECS to voice output
- GoTalk
- Quick Talker
- Talk Book
- Partner Plus
- Talking Brix

2-8 Message Voice Output Devices: Ideas and Integration

- Repetitive lines in a story
- Sequence activities, stories
- Basic vocabulary accessible throughout classroom (art, reading, dramatic play, social phrases)
- Choice making (*give choices whenever possible, even if only a choice of 2)
Challenges with use of AAC in the Classroom

- Resistance by team members
- Lack of education
- Lack of training
- Inaccessible environment
- Lack of funding
- Lack of therapists
- Lack of time
- Lack of resources (adaptations, computer programs)
- Poor understanding of rights
- Differing priorities and inability to compromise

Reasons for Failure

- Lack of support on the part of significant individuals in the user’s life
- Device does not significantly improve expressive communication
- Unreliable device
- Inappropriate device: too complex or too limiting
- Lack of education regarding device
Switch Activation: Cause & Effect Activities

- Gives practice for switch use in a fun and motivating activity
  - Computer activities
  - Powerlink by AbleNet
  - Switch Adapted Camera
  - Switch Adapted Spin Art
  - Switch Adapted Pourer
  - Switch Adapted Scissors

Helpful Hints

- Contact your local colleges and universities with SLP and OT programs for projects
- Contact high schools that require community service hours
- Utilize sharing websites – don’t reinvent the wheel!
Funding Sources

- Medicaid/Medicare
- Private Insurance
- Community Resources (church, local organizations)
- Non-profit funding (Wish List, charity funds)
- School
- Private funding
- Local boards of Developmental Disabilities
- Grants

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