

A PEATC

Do You Know....



Factsheet for Virginia's Parents

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) in Early Childhood

Who May Need AAC and Why?

Children (and adults) who are unable to communicate at the level of their same aged peers may need an **augmentative and/or alternative communication (AAC) system to communicate effectively**. Disabilities which may result in spoken language challenges can include, but are not limited to, cerebral palsy, brain injury, autism spectrum disorders, developmental disabilities, apraxia of speech, and stroke.

The purpose of AAC is to **provide tools that will enable your child to express his wants, needs and thoughts and to aid in expressive and receptive language acquisition and literacy development**. It can include words, facial expressions, gestures and signs, photos, pictures, symbols, communication boards and books, technology systems with recorded speech output, and high-tech systems with speech-generation capability, such as computers, tablets and other mobile devices.

Why is AAC Important and When Should My Child Get Started?

Research shows that **children with communication challenges do best when introduced to AAC as early as 12 months**. If your child does not have a way to effectively communicate with the world around them, **he/she will grow frustrated** and challenging behavior may develop. A simple example: your toddler does not like cheerios but is unable to communicate that. His response when getting cheerios may be to throw them on the floor or smash them with his fist. As your child gets older, the inability to communicate will increase frustration, and could lead to depression and poor long-term academic and other outcomes.

Use of an AAC system does not mean you are giving up on speech. Research has shown that the **use of AAC at an early age can further the development of spoken language**, as your child links communication with having needs met.

Simply identifying or securing a communication system(s) is not enough. **AAC will only work if those who support your child understand the importance of AAC and are committed to its use**. If your baby uses sign language, those around him should learn signs, as well, so that he has every opportunity to communicate and be understood.

Resources on Augmentative and Alternative Communication

[AAC With Energy—Earlier: Research shows children with communication challenges do best when introduced to AAC as early as 12 months, The ASHA Leader: Vol 22, No 1](#)

[Learn AAC Guide \(AssistiveWare\)](#)

[Assistive Technology Network](#)

[AAC Assessments \(VCU Autism Center for Education\)](#)

Contact Us:

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How to I obtain AAC?

Early Intervention (EI) is available to eligible infants and toddlers (birth through age 2) through the federal *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)*. **Special education** services are available under IDEA to eligible children (ages 2 through 21). If your child has a significant speech impairment or cannot speak, AAC should be considered by your child's EI or school-based team. **Request a comprehensive AAC evaluation** be completed. Alternatively, you can inquire with a private speech therapist. Medicaid and/or your private insurance may cover AAC within policy limits.

What Kind of AAC is Best?

There is no one size fits all! **Figuring out the AAC device or strategies that meet your child's needs requires an evaluation of your child's abilities** (including motor, sensory, language, etc.) Your child may use more than one strategy, i.e., pictures and signing or a communication board and a speech app. Your **child's system will be unique to him** and **needs to be flexible and change over time**. For example, if your infant/toddler has pictures/words programmed into an app or a speech device, continual expansion must occur so that your child's vocabulary can increase, and he can communicate increasingly complex thoughts.

How Can I Best Help My Child?

- Make sure **communication is fun!** Play games as you learn and use AAC.
- Make sure your child's **AAC is always available** to him and encourage use in all settings. Provide frequent opportunities for **mutual communication**.
- Communication with AAC can take longer. Unless she asks for help, **resist the urge to finish your child's thoughts or sentences**. It is the same as interrupting you when you speak.
- **Encourage family members and friends to learn and use AAC**. This will help your child develop important social relationships.
- **Don't give up**. It can take time for your child to be successful in using AAC.

MYTHS about the Use of AAC in Early Intervention

as cited by Romney and Sevcik, 2005

- AAC is a last resort in speech language intervention.
- AAC delays or stops further speech development.
- Children must have a certain set of skills to benefit from AAC. Infants and toddlers are not old enough to benefit.
- Speech-Generating Devices (SGD) are only for children who do not have cognitive challenges.
- Children must be a certain age to benefit from AAC.
- AAC should only be introduced when there is no hope for natural speech.
- Speech should always be the primary means of communication.

Don't let these myths delay or deter your efforts to be sure your child can communicate!

PEATC's mission focuses on building positive futures for Virginia's children by working collaboratively with families, schools and communities to improve opportunities for excellence in education and success in school and community life.

For more information about us, please contact:

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