

AAC Prompting Hierarchy

(From Positive AACtion - Rocky Bay 2010; Senner 2010; YAACK 1999)

1	Expectant Pause	Give the child time to respond or the opportunity to initiate communication.
2	Indirect Nonverbal Prompt	Use your body language to indicate to the child that something is expected (e.g. expectant facial expression, questioning hand motion with a shrug, etc).
3	Indirect Verbal Prompt	Use an open-ended question that tells the child that something is expected but nothing too specific (e.g. "Now what?", "What should we do next?"). If there is still no response, you can try to direct the child more specifically (e.g. "Tell me what you want." "You
4	Gestural Cue	
5	Partial Verbal Prompt	If there is still no response, provide them part of the expected response (e.g. "You went to the...").
6	Direct Model	If still no response, model on the student's device (e.g. "The bear is sad."). Pause and wait for the child to imitate or respond.
7	Physical Assistance	Provide hand-over-hand assistance to help the child to form the message using their device.
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Revisiting the

AAC Prompt Hierarchy

Rachael Langley, MA, CCC-SLP

2023 update

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Focus on these healthy habits:

Thoughtful Pause

Be mindful about how much you talk. Pause and wait without putting any pressure on the learner. A pause can be an invitation for the learner to join in.

Express Interest with Body Language

Show you are interested in what the learner is thinking. Use your facial expressions to let them know you're listening.

Observe & Comment

Observe the learner and make an "I wonder..." or an "I think..." comment. This might sound like, "I wonder if you are ready to go," while you say "GO" using AAC.

Model without Expectation

Show them what it looks like to use AAC by using it yourself! Try making comments that don't require the learner to answer. "I LIKE your shoes!" [say "LIKE" using AAC and pointing to their shoes]

Avoid these harmful habits:



STOP

Model so they copy you

I said, "I want cookie," so now you should say, "I want cookie." While this may seem helpful, it's not a healthy strategy to use. We want learners to know that they can choose their words.



STOP


Prompt to make them say it

Touch circle. I'll help you touch circle. Tell me circle. We should not be making anyone say words by using hand-over-hand prompting. It is more harmful than helpful.

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Why are these healthy habits?



The strategies labeled "healthy" are considered to be both respectful and helpful in teaching communication autonomy. This means learners using AAC are taught that language is a tool. They get to decide what to say and when to say it. They are allowed to say, "No!" and "I don't like that."

These healthy strategies are grounded in good teaching practices and reflect habits & routines we see in typical language development.

Why are these harmful habits?



The strategies labeled "harmful" are considered to put someone's bodily autonomy at risk. When we ask learners to say what we tell them to say, or we direct their hands to point to words/symbols that we have determined are 'correct', we are taking the power of language out of their hands.

Strategies that allow one person to touch and control another person's body are particularly dangerous. People with communication disabilities are especially vulnerable to abuse. We want them to understand and demand consent.

Resources related to the **AAC Prompt Hierarchy**

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The Problems with Hand-Over-Hand v2.0

Blog post by Jane Farrall - Jan 2023



Rethinking the AAC Prompting Hierarchy in Severe Apraxia

Blog post by Kate Ahern - March 2016



".....passive modeling was overall significantly more effective than hand-over-hand modeling..." - Biederman et al, 2016

Verbal Prompting, Hand-over-Hand Instruction, and Passive Observation in Teaching Children with Developmental Disabilities

Research article by Biederman, et al - July 2016



The AAC Coach: How I Do It Prompts and Cues

Graphic shared on Facebook by Kate McLaughlin - Sept 2020



Physical Prompting is Excessive

Blog post by "Be A Teaching Unicorn" - a self-described autistic teacher & parent - Dec 2020

