

SUPPORTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNICATION AUTONOMY FOR PEOPLE WHO NEED AAC: EARLY COMMUNICATORS

ALWAYS AIMING FOR COMMUNICATION AUTONOMY

So that each person is able to:
 "say what I want to say,
 to whoever I want to say it to,
 whenever I want to say it,
 however I choose to say it"

Porter, G. (2018)

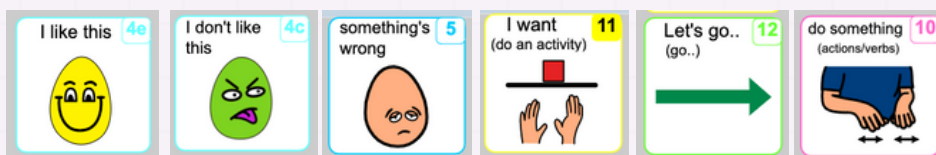
ALWAYS WORKING TOWARDS BEING BETTER COMMUNICATION PARTNERS

FIVE SKILLS WE NEED WHEN SUPPORTING EARLY COMMUNICATORS

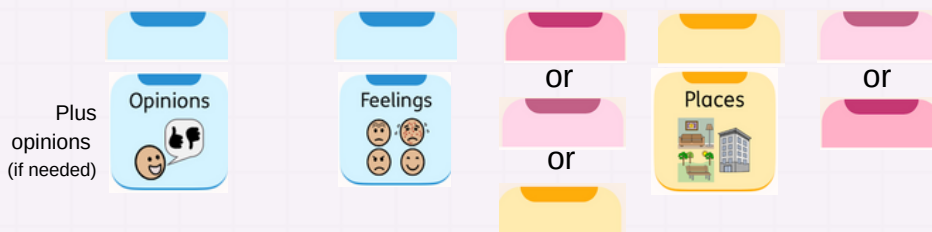
1. Focus on modelling early communication functions
2. Modelling all day, every day, everywhere.
3. Follow the individual's lead and attribute meaning
4. Verbal referencing
5. Mapping Language

1. MODEL EARLY COMMUNICATION FUNCTIONS

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With early communicators who are starting on their journey of using AAC, these are the communication functions that we would focus on modelling to them.

You could say "I **like** what you're doing. It's **great**." or "I **want** to **read** a book" or "Let's **go** outside." You should focus on using comments that interest the student and which make them think "Oh - I'd like to say that."

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2. MODELLING ALL DAY, EVERYWHERE

Modelling all day, every day, everywhere, should be happening with AAC, just like we do with speech. Model AAC with no requirement of a response from the individual. Start with common interactions (errorless learning). Model the things you've been saying, but now pair it with AAC eg. praise, more, finished.

3. FOLLOW THE INDIVIDUAL'S LEAD AND ATTRIBUTE MEANING

Follow the individual's lead without worrying if they meant it or not. They will learn from the experience. Imagine a young baby who says "da, da, da". His parents don't sit debating about whether he meant to say "dad" or not - instead they react as if he did. And their reaction to the "da, da, da" makes it more like that the baby will do it again!

What we have described above is called attributing meaning. It is a very important skill for us to use with early communicators. An individual may currently express themselves with facial expression, vocalisations, gestures, etc. We may understand many of these messages if we are familiar with the individual and their interests. If this is the case, we need to attribute meaning to what we believe they are communicating using both speech and AAC.

For example:

- Tom is looking at and reaching towards a story book "Tom I can see you **looking** at the story book "I think you are saying I **want** an activity, a **book**"
- Tom may yawn "Oh Tom, I **think** something's wrong, I think you are **tired**"
- There was a loud noise, Tom starts to cry "Tom maybe you are saying I **don't like** that, maybe that was too **noisy**"
- Tom looks at you and laughs "I think you **like** this, maybe it's **funny**"
- Tom reaches out and touches his AAC system and selects "**not**". We would say "You said **not**. I think you are saying you **don't want** to do this" - and stop the activity, even if briefly.

4. VERBAL REFERENCING

The examples above also include verbal referencing. This is where we tell the person what we see as their communication e.g. "Tom I can see you looking at the story book" and then we tell them what we think it means "I think you are saying I want an activity, a book". This is important for them to learn what we see as movements for communication.

For students learning to use AAC, it is important that we accompany verbal referencing with mapping - where we show them how they can communicate it with their AAC system.

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5. MAPPING LANGUAGE

Mapping Language is an important skill to use with early communicators who are learning to use AAC. This is when we use symbols to map what we think they are communicating, combined with attributing meaning and verbal referencing. Mapping language is very important when interacting with early communications. It gives us the opportunity to begin adding meaning or "mapping" meaning onto what they may be trying to say, even if we are unsure or do not understand how relevant it is to the interaction. The words in bold in the examples are words appropriate to be said with AAC.

In mapping language, look for anything Tom may do to suggest he agrees or disagrees with your idea (above). If he does touch the same symbols as you, or smiles or looks at you then comment on this. For example:

- If Tom nods you would say, "you said yes, you do **want** the **book**"
- "you looked at me, you are **tired**"
- No response from Tom to "maybe it's **scary**" he then stops crying and you might say "you stopped crying, maybe it was **scary**"
- "you are smiling, I think it is your **favourite**"

MONITOR YOUR COMMUNICATION

As well as developing the skills above, part of being a good communication partner, and supporting every person who needs AAC to become an autonomous communicator, is ensuring that WE develop good communication partner habits. To achieve this we need to be aware of the skills and habits we are trying to foster - and work towards using them more.

FOSTER HEALTHY HABITS - AND AVOID HARMFUL ONES!

Langley (2023) asks us to focus on healthy habits as communication partners, rather than harmful habits. She lists the following healthy habits:

- Thoughtful Pause
- Express Interest with Body Language
- Observe & Comment
- Model without Expectation

Harmful habits are:

- Model so they copy you
- Prompt to make them say it

In monitoring your communication, make sure you focus on increasing your healthy habits and avoiding the harmful ones!

Please note: words in bold in the examples are the ones we say with AAC.

SUPPORTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNICATION AUTONOMY FOR PEOPLE WHO NEED AAC: EARLY COMMUNICATORS

AUTONOMY CHALLENGE

Sampson (2021) suggests that we need to cut back on yes/no questions and give people who use AAC an opportunity to share something. Or, if we can't avoid a question, that we use more open questions. She has lots of suggestions for modifying your communication style to support the development of communication autonomy - but our favourite is her suggestion that we take an autonomy challenge!

You can use the table below to look at your communication style - and whatever your starting point is, you can work on shifting towards a style that supports the development of communication autonomy. You can use the table with a video of yourself or you can ask someone else to score you.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Situation: e.g. shared reading _____

Comments/sharing thoughts and ideas Aim: 80% of the time	Questions/Directions/Prompts Aim: 20% of the time

REFERENCES

- Langley, R. (2023, February 24) Revisiting the AAC Prompt Hierarchy. <https://www.facebook.com/RachaelLangleyAAC> [Image attached] [Status update]. Facebook.<https://www.facebook.com/photo/fbid=656629066463747&set=a.381380213988635>
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- Sampson, J. (2021). The Autonomy Bucket Challenge. Two Way Street. <https://twowaystreet.com.au/2021/10/09/the-autonomy-bucket-challenge/>