

Communicating with a Person Who Uses Augmentative and Alternative Communication Equipment (AAC)



Communication is a basic human right. All people are entitled to express their needs, ideas and feelings, establish relationships and participate in their community of care. Not everyone communicates the same way. Some people, for example, may point to words, write words, use gestures or communicate using an eye gaze device. However way a person communicates, successful communication involves a constant interplay between people, a sharing in the dialogue.

People who use augmentative communication equipment rely on different ways to communicate. You do not need special skills to communicate with a person who uses an AAC system. You do need to remember that a person who cannot speak does not necessarily have a hearing or cognitive problem. People with either congenital problems or acquired conditions are among those individuals who rely on AAC.

Here are some tools to assist you in your communication with people who use AAC:

Create the Right Environment

- Find a quiet room that will allow a person using AAC to communicate effectively while still protecting his or her privacy. These devices talk aloud and may or may not be set at an appropriate volume.
- Do not ask the person to explain their AAC method, touch the communication device or display or examine the vocabulary on it unless you are invited to learn more about it. This is their personal space. At the same time, it may be necessary to ask the AAC user if you can look for directions on how he or she communicates with it. These directions are often on the AAC user's wheelchair tray or in a communication binder.
- Make eye contact with the person. This may mean sitting down at the same level with the AAC user.
- If necessary, speak to a nurse, therapist or family member to learn the most efficient and effective way to communicate with this person.

Tools for Good Communication

- Give the AAC user time to communicate. Using an AAC system takes more time than speaking.
- Do not keep talking to fill the silence after you have spoken or asked a question. It takes time to construct messages using AAC. Learn to try to feel comfortable with the silences.
- If you're short on time, be honest and reschedule your appointment with the AAC user to another day when you have more time to spend with the person.
- Yes/No questions or statements can sometimes be the fastest way to communicate, but these kinds of questions also are the most restrictive. If appropriate, ask some open-ended questions. (Example: "Did you have a good day?" versus "Tell me about your day.")

- Make sure that the person has the device and is able to use it comfortably to communicate with you.
- Wait for the person to finish what is being said and try not to interrupt. It may help to take notes. Ask clarifying questions or add comments when the person has taken his or her turn in the conversation.
- Speak directly to the person using the AAC device, not to a friend, family or staff person accompanying him or her.
- Take care not to speak loudly, slowly, or in an otherwise condescending manner.

If a Person Uses a Display

1. Ask the person to show you how he or she points to items on the communication equipment. Some people use a finger, others a thumb, knuckle, toe, an eye gaze or blink or head pointer.
2. Say each word or letter selected aloud, if appropriate, so that the person knows you have the right word.
3. Say the words in the order that the person points to them.
4. Do not interrupt when the person is in the middle of a message.
5. You may find it useful to have a paper and pen to remember the letters and words. Sometimes, communication can be a slow process, especially with long messages.
6. You may want to ask the AAC user if he or she wants you to anticipate a letter, word or phrase. Guessing can sometimes speed up communication. It can also be frustrating for the user if there is a resulting error or communication breakdown.

You and Your Therapy Dog

For people who use AAC, a visit from a therapy dog can be a welcome change from the demanding task of communicating with others. Be comfortable if communication isn't a priority. Be careful around electronic equipment with your dog, especially cords and wires. Take care your dog doesn't chew or step on them. Dogs also may be sensitive to the noises from AAC, especially if the computer voice is artificial or high-pitched.

A Final Note

Communicating with someone who uses AAC may take extra time, but it is worth the effort. Just because someone can't speak doesn't mean that person doesn't have a lot to say.

Prepared by **Julianne Labreche**, Associate Member OTD, and **Karen Luker**, OTD member. Both are certified speech-language pathologists.



OTD Toolbox Infosheet #7:

Design donated by www.gunmaster.com

Ottawa Therapy Dogs

Suite 750, 1500 Bank St.

Ottawa, Ontario

K1H 1B8

613.261.6834

info@OttawaTherapyDogs.ca



Good dogs doing great work!

ottawatherapydogs.ca