



Frequent Questions about Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC)

Answers to common questions parents have about alternative and augmentative communication.

What is alternative and augmentative communication (AAC)?

Talking is only one way of communicating. Alternative augmentative (sounds like “AHG-MEN-TA-TIV”) communication is ways, other than speech, that are used to help a person communicate. These may include:

- Body language (like nodding, shrugging or pointing)
- Sign language
- Picture and symbol boards
- Electronic devices - computers, mobile technology, voice-output devices
- Reading and writing

These can augment or add to and help how a child communicates. An AAC system for a child and their family may include using certain techniques and or devices to help in communication. For example, a family may use a picture board, sign language and an electronic device. Each family and child finds what works well for them.

How can AAC help?

If your child doesn't speak, AAC systems can often help. They can act as a bridge until speech develops, augment what speech is present, or provide an alternative if your child does not develop speech. Your child's speech and language therapist can help you in making the decision about what kind of AAC systems you might want to use.

Being able to communicate is important to a full and meaningful life. Expressing needs, wants, ideas and sharing fun and sorrow are basic human needs at all ages. Being able to express themselves allows a child to connect with others. In addition, there is a great deal of critical learning and development that takes place in a child's early years. It is very important to give children with speech difficulties ways to communicate to enrich the skills they do have.

My child understands me and I can understand my child. Why do we need an AAC communication system?

Even though you may understand your child, many of the people in your child's life and community may not. You will not (and should not) always be there to translate for your child. Being able to communicate with other people each day is a big part of your child's life. It is also a safety issue. Your child should have opportunities to communicate not just with adults but with other children and friends.

To Learn More

- Autism Center
206-987-8080
- Speech & Language
Services 206-987-2104
- Ask your child's
healthcare provider
- www.seattlechildrens.org

Free Interpreter Services

- In the hospital, ask
your child's nurse.
- From outside the
hospital, call the
toll-free Family
Interpreting Line
1-866-583-1527. Tell
the interpreter the
name or extension you
need.

Will using AAC slow down my child's speech or make my child stop talking?

No. If your child uses signs, a device, pictures or symbols, it will not stop or slow down their speech growth. In fact, it might even help your child talk more. AAC methods offer your child useful language tools and are fun. When a child and family use AAC it can remove emotional pressure and frustration and as a result, talking can increase. Research shows that AAC supports spoken language by increasing interaction, language skills and providing a model for speech.

Will my child ever talk?

Talking isn't an either-or question, and labeling a child as "nonverbal" does not mean that the child cannot use speech for any type of communication. The more severe a child's motor limitations, mainly in how they start and control fine movements, the more likely that child will continue to have difficulty in controlling the fine coordinated movements needed for speech. Children's motor systems develop in ways that we can't always predict. Early intervention is too early to give up on further improvement in speech skills.

Will using AAC highlight my child's differences?

Many teachers have found that speaking friends and classmates are very interested in AAC systems, and they are encouraged in schools. This can be a real boost to the self-esteem of the child using the augmentative communication system.

When should we use this communication system?

Think of the AAC system your family uses as your child's voice. It should be available to use whenever they want it. For some families using the AAC system may be awkward and inconvenient at first. But after time it will become integrated into your family life. Ask your speech therapist for tips on how to start using it at home and school.

Adapted from handout produced by the Hamilton-Wentworth Communication Collective Advocacy Group for the Communicatively Impaired: Hamilton, Ontario.

Seattle Children's offers interpreter services for Deaf, hard of hearing or non-English speaking patients, family members and legal representatives free of charge. Seattle Children's will make this information available in alternate formats upon request. Call the Family Resource Center at 206-987-2201.

This handout has been reviewed by clinical staff at Seattle Children's. However, your child's needs are unique. Before you act or rely upon this information, please talk with your child's healthcare provider.

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