

# Frequent Questions about Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC)

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

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## What is alternative and augmentative communication (AAC)?

Talking is only 1 way of communicating. Alternative and augmentative (AHG-men-ta-tiv) communication are ways that are used to help a person communicate other than speech. 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 add to and help (augment) 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. Every family finds a mix that works well for them.

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## How can AAC help?

If your child doesn't speak, AAC systems can 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 can 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 your child to connect with others. In addition, there is a great deal of learning and development that takes place in your child's early years. It is important to give children with speech difficulties ways to communicate to support the skills they do have.

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### To Learn More

- Speech & Language Services  
206-987-2104
- Ask your child's healthcare provider
- [seattlechildrens.org](http://seattlechildrens.org)

### Free Interpreter Services

- In the hospital, ask your 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.

**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 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.

**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. Don't give up on further improvement in speech skills early in your child's life.

**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.

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