

Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC)

What is AAC?

Augmentative and alternative communication, or AAC, is any form of communication that is used as an alternative to spoken language. It is often used by autistic people who do not speak, or whose speech is unreliable.

Some AAC users are able to type, and will type what they want to say into a tablet or other device, which then speaks the words for them. Others use a grid of words and/or pictures, either on a tablet or on a physical board, and communicate by tapping or gesturing to the relevant words/pictures. Some people will use AAC exclusively; others might speak in some situations and use AAC in others, or switch between the two depending on what works best for them in the moment.

Why autistic people use AAC

Autism is a hugely variable condition, and there are a wide range of reasons an autistic person may need or prefer to use AAC over spoken language. Some of the most common reasons are:

- Motor skills difficulties that make speech impossible, or make spoken words hard to understand (especially in noisy environments).
- Finding it easier to put thoughts into words via typing or communication grids than through speech.
- Autistic children often develop less complex motor skills, like being able to gesture or tap a picture, before they develop more complex skills like starting to speak. Even autistic children who will eventually be able to speak can often benefit from using AAC at a young age while their motor development catches up with what they want to communicate.
- For some people, using muscle memory to find the words or symbols on an AAC device is far easier than trying to find the words in their own minds each time they want to communicate something.

Communicating with an AAC user

The best way to work out how to communicate with someone who uses AAC is to ask them what they need – there are dozens of different kinds of AAC, and every AAC user is an individual with different needs and preferences. To get started, though, here are some basic tips that apply to most AAC users:

- Be patient. It usually takes longer to get a point across using AAC than it does using spoken language, which can be frustrating for both sides of a conversation. Interrupting, finishing the AAC user's sentences for them, or otherwise trying to hurry the conversation along can feel intensely dismissive and disrespectful to the AAC user, and is likely to just make the experience more frustrating for everyone.
- Don't make assumptions about how much an AAC user can understand. Many people who use AAC are completely fluent and will understand everything you're saying; even people who use very little language themselves often understand a lot more language than they're capable of using. Always treat an AAC user the same way you would treat a speaking person – don't talk about them as if they aren't there, treat them like a child, or dismiss their opinions.
- Never take away an AAC user's device (unless they have explicitly asked you to hold it or help them with something on it). It can be tempting, especially when working with children, to take away an AAC device if a child is using it to yell, swear, repeat the same nonsense sentence, or otherwise disrupt others – but for AAC users, their device is their voice. The same goes for changing a device's setup (again, unless you know what you're doing and have been specifically asked to by the user). Many AAC users rely on having memorised where all of the words and/or symbols on their device are, and changing this around without permission makes communication difficult or impossible.

- Pay attention to non-verbal communication as well. Using AAC can be draining, and learning to use it can be frustrating. If you sense that the person you're communicating with is getting tired or upset, it can help to suggest taking a break from the conversation, or changing the subject. Some AAC users, particularly children or people who are still learning to use their AAC, may not be able to communicate their distress or frustration in words, so it's important to watch for non-verbal signs as well (like pushing an AAC device away, covering their ears, or trying to physically leave the room or the interaction).

More information

On different kinds of AAC:

<https://justkeepstimming.com/2019/12/27/all-about-aac/>

Personal experiences with AAC:

<https://turtleisavverb.blogspot.com/2021/03/i-like-turtles-or-aac-is-really-hard.html>

For speech language therapists and other professionals working with AAC users: <https://communicationfirst.org/slps-as-aac-gatekeepers/>

Tips for navigating online meetings with AAC users:

<https://communicationfirst.org/best-practices-for-online-meetings/>