

# Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)

## Myths and Frequently asked Questions

### 1. What exactly is an augmentative communication system?

Talking is only one method of communicating. Augmentative communication refers to ways (other than speech) that are used to help a person communicate, including:

- any sounds a person can make
- body language (touching, nodding, shrugging, pointing, eye contact, facial expressions)
- sign language
- picture and symbol boards
- electronic aids - computers, voice devices
- print

### 2. He's only two years old. Why should he learn to use an augmentative communication system now? Why not wait until he is older and can communicate better?

Research tells us that an astounding amount of learning takes place in the first five years of life. Children start using "recognizable" language at around twelve months of age (if not sooner) as they learn more and more about themselves and their world (home) and the people in it - mum-mum, dad-dad.

If a child fails in his first attempts to communicate, frustrations can mount and confidence may never get a chance to bloom.

Expressing needs, wants and ideas and sharing fun and sorrow are basic human needs at all ages. If natural speech is not present, augmentative communication systems can often help - either by acting as a bridge until speech does develop, augmenting what speech is present, or by providing an alternative if speech does not develop. A speech language pathologist should help you in making these decisions.

### 3. He understands everything I say and I can understand everything he says. Why does he need an augmentative communication system?

Even though you may understand your child, chances are, most of the rest of the people he meets do not - people on the street, in stores, church, or preschool. Parents will not (and should not) always be there to translate. Being able to communicate with other people he meets each day is a big part of life and not just with adults but with children of his/her own age - something that is often underestimated and overlooked by adults. It is our job as parents and teachers to help young ones get along without us (literally, to work ourselves out of a job).

Keeping in mind 1) how important communication is to a full and meaningful life and 2) how much critical learning takes place in the early years, we see how important it is to give children with speech difficulties other ways of communicating and to enrich the skills they do have.

### 4. If my child uses augmentative communication will he slow down in his speech or stop talking?

No. If your child uses hand signs, pictures and/or symbols, he will not slow in his speech. In fact, perhaps even the opposite. These methods offer your child useful language tools and are FUN. The use of augmentative communication can remove emotional pressure and frustration and as a result "talking" can increase.

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### **5. No one else he knows uses this form of language - won't this make him seem different when people see him use it? How common is it?**

Yes, using augmentative communication will make him seem "different". However, the child is already different because of his difficulty using speech. The use of an augmentative communication system can make the difference between a passive child who does not take part in life, and an alert, lively child.

It has been the experience of many teachers that "speaking" friends and classmates are very interested in communication systems, and this is encouraged in schools. This can be a real boost to the self-esteem of the child using the augmentative communication system.

### **6. Why don't you teach him to read and spell? They are more universal methods of communication.**

Think of the speaking and reading abilities of most six year olds. They can speak far more words (2500 approx.) than they can read (100 approx.). What a shame to have your language output limited to what you can read or spell! As reading skills improve, children will often move to alphabet word boards and typewriters/computers. The use of pictures and symbols has provided an important bridge to this stage.

### **7. He's not very exact in pointing out his pictures or making signs. He becomes angry when I don't know what he means. We are both frustrated. What should I do?**

During the early stages of learning we have to learn to accept "approximations" of signing or pointing just as we accept approximations when a child is learning to speak. It is important to remain calm and to gently persevere at these stages until the message is understood. It also helps if the adult takes some the blame by saying, "my eyes weren't watching - let's try again" or "please tell me again - I wasn't paying attention". Always say the word that the child is pointing to, or attempting to sign.

### **8. We are a busy family - when should we use this communication system?**

Could you get by without talking? It must be remembered that the communication system is your child's voice so it should be available to use whenever he/she wants it. Often the time or place is awkward and inconvenient, but do persevere. At home, having a separate board for each room conveniently posted may be a good idea - a food and family board for the kitchen, a clothing board for the bedroom, a toy board for the toy box, a washing board for the bathroom, a TV board for choosing TV programs. Photos, cutouts from catalogues, food and toy packages or simple drawings could be used. Often teachers and speech language pathologists also have picture sets that could be photocopied.

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