Augmentative and Alternative Communication Supports for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders

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What is Augmentative-Alternative Communication (AAC)?

- all forms of communication other than verbal language that are used to indicate wants and needs
- includes gestures, facial expressions, written language, picture communication boards, voice output devices, etc.
- used to support previously established modes of communication or to replace non-functional modes of communication
When should an AAC device be used?

- When the individual possesses an “expressive disorder that interferes with or prevents a child’s ability to develop and use oral language” (National Joint Committee for the Communication Needs of Persons with Severe Disabilities, 2014)
  - Severe articulation disorders
  - Non-verbal
  - Minimal language
  - Language processing difficulties
Why are AAC supports so important for children with ASD?

- Improve functional communication skills
- Increase participation in activities of daily living
- Increase independence in completing activities of daily living
- Increase participation in academic instruction
- Increase personal safety
- Improve social communication skills
- Decrease frustration which can lead to a decrease in undesirable behavior (i.e., self-injury and aggression)
Which children with ASD would benefit from AAC supports?

- Most, if not all, children with ASD can benefit from some form of AAC support.

Children with mild-moderate social/communication deficits:
- Visual schedules
- Social stories
- Topic Boards

Children with moderate-severe social/communication deficits:
- Visual schedules
- Picture Communication systems
- Voice output devices
AAC Supports - Visual Schedules

- **My Day**
  - 7:00: Eat breakfast
  - 8:00: Put on shoes
  - 9:30: Get in the car
  - 10:00: Have a good day!

**Morning Schedule**
- Eat breakfast
- Put on shoes
- Put on coat
- Put on backpack
- Get in the car
- Have a good day!

**Today's Schedule**
- 9:00: Snack
  - 10:00: Take walk
  - 11:00: Pick up Robert
  - 12:00: Set table
  - 1:00: Eat dinner
  - 2:00: Take shower
AAC Supports - Social Stories
AAC Supports - Topic Boards

Words:
- Minnie
- Daisy
- Toodles
- pets
- wash
- bubbles
- bow
- fence
- dance
- help
- win
- fun
- beginning
- middle
- The End
- pet show
- Clubhouse
- happy
- tired
- scared
- Luke
- food
- tooth
- clean
- brush teeth
- toothbrush
- toothpaste
- teeth
- spit
- eat
- mouth
- water
- dirty
- morning
- night
- bathroom
- sink
- little
- a lot
- happy

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AAC Supports - Picture Exchange Communication System
AAC Supports- Flip ‘N Talk
AAC Supports – Sign Language
AAC Supports - Voice Output Devices
AAC Supports - iPad AAC apps
How can we determine which supports are most appropriate for a child with ASD?

• Pursue a speech and language evaluation
  – County-based resources
    • Request an Assistive Technology Evaluation through the child’s public school system
  – Private sector resources
    • Kennedy Krieger Institute’s Center for Autism and Related Disorders (CARD): AAC Evaluation, Picture Exchange Clinic, Functional Communication Clinic (phone: 443-923-7630)
    • Pathfinders for autism: www.pathfindersforautism.org
    • American Speech-Language-Hearing Association: www.asha.org
AAC Evaluations at CARD

• Standardized language assessment to obtain a level of language functioning
• Language Sample during play-based activities
• AAC Device trials- no/low-tech through high-tech
AAC Evaluation through the school system

- Does not include language testing
  - Children should have language testing every 3 years
  - Based on speech and language goals
- Trials
  - Request made at IEP
  - 30 day trial
  - Put on IEP
    - Specific device should **NOT** be placed on IEP
AAC treatment - Functional Communication Clinic at CARD

- Parent Training
  - 6-12 weeks
  - Generalization

- Topics
  - Use of flexible language
  - Communicative functions
  - Initiating communication
  - Book activities
  - Activities of Daily Living
  - Play
Core and Fringe Vocabulary vs. Key Vocabulary
AAC treatment - Vocabulary Selection

• Core Vocabulary
  – A small set of simple words, in any language, that are used frequently and across contexts (Cross, Baker, Klotz & Badman, 1997)
  – 80% of language consists of core vocabulary
AAC treatment - Vocabulary Selection
AAC treatment- Vocabulary Selection

• Fringe Vocabulary
  – More situation specific. Their importance changes from context to context and from person to person (The Bridge School, 2013)
  – E.g., evaporation, museum, funny, etc.
  – Topic Boards
AAC treatment - Vocabulary Selection

• Key Vocabulary
  – Recommended for children with Autism
  – Individual Vocabulary Selection
  – More motivating
  – Topic specific
How can we incorporate the use of AAC supports into the home, community, and education settings?

- Plan ahead
- Use routine-specific vocabulary
- Manipulate the environment to encourage communication
- “Tempt” the individual to communicate
How can a family obtain AAC supports for their children?

- Pay out-of-pocket
- Complete a request via insurance company
- Access a device through the AT department in the child’s school system
- MDTAP
  - www.mdod.maryland.gov/mtap%20home.aspx
  - phone: 800-832-4827

- Low Intensity Support Services (LISS)
  - www.dda.dhmh.maryland.gov/SitePages/liss.aspx
