

Simple **AAC**

Smartbox

**Show**

Point to symbols as you talk to model language. You don't need to point to every word, just the most important ones.

**Interesting**

Keep things motivating and fun. Base activities for learning AAC on the learner's interests.

**Months and months**

Learning AAC takes lots of time - just keep modelling. Don't worry if the learner is not using AAC straight away.

**Pause**

Give learners lots of time to respond. Pause to show them it's their turn to talk. Try counting to 10!

**Language**

Teach different types of words - describing words and action words and more. Not just things!

**Explore**

Give learners plenty of time to explore their device and select different symbols. Then just respond to whatever the user is selecting.

**Always available**

If they don't have their AAC with them, they can't learn to use it! This can be electronic or paper based.

**Add words**

Add a word to what the learner says. If they say one word, repeat it back with another word added.

**Comment**

Use the learner's AAC to talk about what is happening. Don't ask questions you know the answer to, make a simple comment instead.

Simple AAC

Each letter of Simple AAC represents a different strategy which can be used to support someone to learn to use symbols to communicate. From modelling and making things interesting, to thinking about the different ways we can respond to AAC learners.

Each strategy is explained in a way that is easy to understand - whether you have just started working with AAC, are looking to develop your skills, or are looking for an easy way to explain these strategies to other people.

Simple AAC was created by Daisy Clay, Speech and Language Therapist, for Smartbox.

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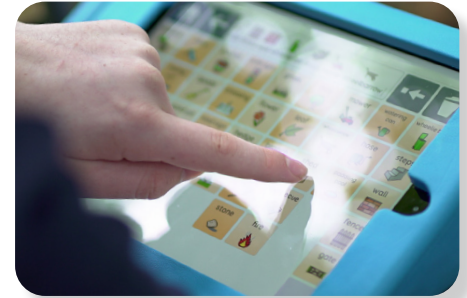
When someone is learning to use symbol AAC, one of the best things you can do to help is to use symbols to communicate with them yourself, to Show the person what you are expecting them to do. There is lots and lots of research to show that this really works!

Modelling

This is also called 'aided language stimulation' or 'augmented input'. Whilst these do mean slightly different things, the basic idea behind them is the same: use the AAC learner's communication aid yourself when you talk to them.

This can be an electronic ("high tech") device, a paper-based ("low tech") symbol board or book, or a combination of both. You might also use a second device or symbol book that is the same as the AAC user's.

Those of us who use spoken language all started off the same way - watching and listening to everyone around us



speak, before we started to speak ourselves. This is what someone learning to use AAC needs to do too.

Show them symbols being used

We need the person who is learning AAC to be surrounded with the language of symbols, so they can see how they are used for communication. We can do this by using their communication aid with them, as much as possible, throughout the day. If you think about learning a foreign language, it is well known that the best way to learn it is to be surrounded by people speaking that language (for example, by going to that country).

An AAC user may not regularly see anyone else who uses AAC, so it is even more important for us to make sure they see other people using AAC - us! This may help them to accept and understand that they can communicate using a communication aid.

Getting Started

Key words: You don't need to point to every single word you say, especially to start with. You can just show the most important words, and say the other words. For example, "Let's GO", "I think YOU LIKE this" or "do you WANT to do MORE?"

Make mistakes: Remember, it's okay to make mistakes when you are modelling, as it shows the AAC user that it's okay for them to make mistakes too. It is also a chance to show them what to do if they make a mistake, for example deleting words or looking in different places to find a word.

Give ideas: As well as modelling what you are saying to the AAC learner, try to give them some ideas of what they could say and show them how to say it using their AAC. When we learn a foreign language, it's great to hear the language being used, but hearing ideas of what you can say and how to say it really helps too.

Think out loud: Try thinking out loud, and describe what you are doing. For example, "Hmm, I'm looking for the word JUMP. That's an action word, so I need to go to the actions grid here".

Time to practice: It might help to choose a time each day when you're going to really focus on using the person's communication aid when talking to them. For example, it could be at a certain time each day, or during a particular activity.

Just point to symbols as you talk.



I nteresting



When teaching AAC, try to keep things Interesting! It seems obvious, but it is easy to forget this when we are busy focusing on setting targets and thinking about the end goal of someone being an AAC user.

But we know from research that a lot of communication aids will be abandoned, and one reason this can happen is that the AAC user is not motivated to use it.

We also know people are more likely to learn when they are interested in something, and this is the same for learning AAC. You are more likely to learn the language you are seeing and hearing, if the language is about something you are paying attention to – and you're more likely to be paying attention if you're interested!

So think about what things the person learning AAC is interested in, and how you can use that to teach AAC.

Using the example of learning a foreign language again,

if you love football, you would almost certainly learn more quickly if someone showed you how to talk about football in that language (and even took you to a football match so you could practice talking at the same time), compared to someone just giving you a list of words about a topic you had no interest in whatsoever.

Remember to keep it fun and motivating!



Getting Started

Start with the learner's interests: Relate your teaching to the individual's favourite things. If you wanted to teach describing words (adjectives) and they love music, you could listen to music as you model words like LOUD and QUIET or FAST and SLOW. Or if they love cars, you could look at a car magazine, and describe different pictures of those cars.

Be multisensory: Think of activities which use different senses, like music (listening), video (looking), or cooking (touch and taste). As well as making things more interesting, using multiple senses can really help someone to learn and remember more than simply talking to someone.

Explore and respond: If you are introducing a certain topic or particular vocabulary, navigate to that grid, then let the AAC user explore and select any of the words. Respond to their selections to show what those words mean. So, for example, if teaching describing words, let the user select any describing word then find something that matches that describing word. So, if they say SHINY, find something SHINY!

Use play: With younger AAC learners, use play to keep things interesting. Again, if you have particular words you want to teach, think of how to do that in a fun way. For example, when teaching action words (verbs), let the child choose any action word they like, then act this out with a teddy or doll. DANCE! RUN! SLEEP! WAVE! This simple cause and effect activity can be very motivating, and allows for no-fail exploration, whilst the learner gets to see the meaning of the words they select.

Follow their lead: You could also let the user show you what they are interested in by letting them navigate to any topic they like on their device, and then talk with them about it (using their AAC of course!).

Boxes of fun: When teaching core words (words like GO, STOP, BIG, LOOK), try gathering lots of different objects together and making a box of things which can be looked at whilst using that word. A box to teach the word LOOK might contain lots of things which are interesting to look at, like fairy lights, sparkly material, shiny jewellery, a mirror, and a photo album. And when you are using the boxes, you can model other core words such as OPEN, MORE and SHUT.

M^onths and months



Learning AAC takes time. Simply giving someone a communication aid does not mean they will start to use it straight away. It's really important to remember that we might not see results straight away, and some AAC learners will need Months and months of seeing their communication aid used by others, before they are ready to begin to use it themselves.

Learning language takes time

Typically, children learning to talk will hear spoken language for at least 12 months before we expect them to say a single word!

Don't give up

When a baby is three months old, and they still aren't talking, we don't give up. We keep on going. And every speaking child will say their first word at a slightly different age. This is the same for AAC learners. It will take a different amount of time before each learner starts to use their communication aid. It may only be one month, it may

be six months. We also don't stop modelling language once a child starts to speak – we keep going forever!

It's never too early, or too late!

Sometimes AAC is seen as a last resort, and something to try once everything else has failed, but in fact, AAC can be really helpful when introduced early, as soon as someone is experiencing difficulties communicating. This might be paper based symbols, or an electronic device. There is no evidence that AAC will stop someone from developing and using natural speech if they are able to, and absolutely no harm in introducing AAC early.

Similarly, it is also never too late to introduce AAC! Whilst AAC is becoming more popular and well understood, there may be many adults with communication and literacy difficulties who were not offered the chance to learn to use AAC when they were younger, but could still really benefit from being introduced to symbol communication.

Show, show, show for months and months and months

As we saw with Show, before we can expect someone to use symbols to communicate, we have to show them how. We need to use all of the words we want to teach, in as many different situations as possible. And then keep on doing this, for months!

Think about what will work best for you. Some people may feel confident to jump in and start trying to use the communication aid all day, every day. Others may prefer to choose specific activities to start with, to build up their confidence at using symbols. Or some may find it helpful to choose a set of words to focus on using throughout the day.

Allow time for exploring

As well as hearing language being used for all of these months, children who are learning to speak will also spend months practicing using their voice to make different sounds, before they start to talk properly. It is completely normal to expect AAC learners to do the same with their communication aid. So, make sure that there is time for the learner to experiment with the sounds and words on their communication aid.

Learning access

Many AAC learners might also be getting used to a new access method, such as switches or eye gaze, making it even more important to allow plenty of time to practice and learn.

Getting Started

Plenty of time: Simply give the AAC learner plenty of time to hear and see how symbols are used for communication, and don't expect them to start using it straight away.

Time to experiment: Allow the AAC learner to select symbols and words on their communication aid to see what they do. Even if they are just exploring, and appear to be selecting randomly, respond to their selections as meaningful. This will help to teach how they can be used for communication.

Model, model, model! Try to model AAC each day in lots of different situations, as often as you can.

Pause

Sometimes we can underestimate just how much time an AAC user needs before they can respond to us and something as simple as a Pause can be really helpful. They may need more time to think about where the word they want is in their AAC system.

Individuals with complex needs might also need more time to process what has been said to them, or need longer to think about how to respond.

An individual might need more time to physically initiate a movement and select what they want to say, whether they are using direct access, switches, head pointers or eye gaze. This is especially true if they are learning to use a new access method as well as learning the language of symbols!

And finally, an individual might benefit from a prompt to show them it is their turn to speak. You can offer this prompt by staying interested and using facial expressions



to show you are waiting for a response.

Anyone can do this!

Pausing is one of the easiest things that you can do to support someone who is learning to use AAC. You don't need any special equipment, training, or time to prepare.

Just stop, wait, and listen.

Stopping and waiting says "It's your turn to say something".



Getting Started

Taking turns: Think about pausing as a way to show the AAC learner it is their turn to say something. Just make sure you give them plenty of time to take their turn.

You go first: Pausing can also be a good way to encourage the AAC learner to be the first one to communicate, rather than always just responding to what someone else has said.

Try counting: Sometimes it can be helpful to count to ten or twenty in your head, to make sure you really are leaving enough time. Ten seconds can feel longer than you think!



L language

When teaching AAC try to remember all of the different reasons we use Language. It's not just about asking for things! Although this can sometimes be very motivating, we need to teach other types of words too – not just names of things.

There's so much more to communication than just requesting. A study of young children who were learning to talk showed that only 20% of what they said were requests. So what about the other 80%!

For anyone, of any age, to be able to communicate fully, 100% of the time, we need describing words, action words, position words, question words, and more. These different types of words will help us to communicate for lots of different reasons. We call these different reasons language functions.

Asking for what we want is all very well, but once we have what we asked for, we might want to ask a question about



it, tell someone else about it, get someone's attention or help with it.

Think about the difference between an AAC user who knows how to ask for TV, compared to someone who is able to:

- GET HELP to turn the TV on
- ASK to watch something else
- TELL someone that's their favourite TV show
- COMMENT on what is happening on the TV
- PROTEST if someone tries to turn the TV off
- ANSWER the question 'what are you watching?'
- NEGOTIATE with someone who wants to change the channel

Getting Started

Choose an activity: Try to think of five different reasons to use language - language functions - during that activity. You can use the example of TV above to help you. Make a list of words that would be useful for each one, and then model those lots during the activity. Remember, it doesn't matter if the AAC learner doesn't copy you straight away, just give them plenty of time.

Focus on one language function: Think about the language the person using AAC is already using. What reasons can they already communicate for? What other language functions would be good to teach them? Perhaps they don't ask questions, or they don't ask for help. Choose one of these, and think about all of the opportunities throughout the day when you could show the person what they could say. Then model, model, model!

It's okay to teach requesting too, and it's an important skill to practice. But, think about all of the different things the AAC learner might want to request.

As well as asking for an object, you can ask for other things, such as asking for a person, for information, or for an activity. Similarly, think about all of the different ways we can ask for things: "my turn" "I want TV" "where is Dad?" "do it" "again!" "now more" "put it in" "come here" "more" "can I do it?" "my turn" "you now".

Think about all of the different reasons we talk!





It's important that we give people time to Explore – and play with – their device, to see what all of the symbols and cells do. This is probably how most people would react if they were given a communication aid, or any piece of technology – by starting to use it to see what happens. It's a natural reaction, and one that's key to learning.

AAC users need to babble too

It is so important that we give AAC learners plenty of time and opportunities to experiment with different symbols and words on their communication aid.

Teach meaning by responding meaningfully

At first, the learner might not understand the meaning of the words they are selecting, and may even be selecting words at random, but this is the perfect chance for us to teach meaning. By responding to anything they say, we are showing the learner that we have understood them. Sometimes an individual learning to use AAC may start by babbling to themselves, but responding to their selections



can help to teach them that when they select something, they are actually communicating with someone else.

Some learners may enjoy selecting the same words repeatedly, and it can be tempting to take those words away or even take the AAC system away. Don't! It is so important that we don't take language away, but help the individual to use that language in the right way.

Exploring new vocabulary

Remember, when you add new words to someone's communication aid, it will be normal for them to explore these new words. Make sure you give them time to do this, so they can learn what each new word sounds like, and where to find them. If the individual is self-conscious to do this while you are there, offer them time to explore by themselves, or you could even give them headphones.

Getting Started

Taking turns. Every time you respond to something the AAC user selects, you are showing them how to take turns. They say something, then you say something, they say something, then you say something, etc. Turn taking is also an important skill for conversation.

Think of a topic and let the learner explore. For example, if the learner has a grid of clothes vocabulary and they select TROUSERS you could say “yes, you are wearing TROUSERS, look, and so am I”. If they then selected SKIRT you could say “oh look, yes, she is wearing a SKIRT (pointing)”. And so on. Just responding in a simple way like this can be a great way to start.

Respond through play: For younger learners, there are lots of simple play activities you can do:

1. **Action words** - let the child explore action words, and either act out the actions yourself or use a teddy or dolly. So if they say JUMP you or teddy jump, if they say SWIM you pretend to swim etc.
2. **Colour vocabulary** - respond by finding things around you that are that colour, or by selecting that coloured crayon and colouring on a piece of paper, or create a giant game by placing pieces of coloured paper on the floor and jumping between each one
3. **Topic vocabulary** - respond by searching the internet for pictures or videos of items in that topic, e.g. transport or nature

Letters: exploring might not always be on a page of vocabulary, it might mean exploring the keyboard page. Exploring the keyboard page and allowing the learner to ‘scribble’ and explore different letter combinations is an important part of learning to read and write, and is something that can support literacy development for AAC learners too.

It's okay for learners to play with their device by selecting words



Always available



AAC should Always be Available. If an AAC learner does not have access to AAC, then how will they ever learn to use it?

If they only have access to AAC at certain times of the day or week, it will take much longer for them to learn to use it. This one seems fairly obvious, but sadly, it's all too common to hear the words "I'll just go and get their communication aid". If it's in a bag or in the cupboard it can't be used!

Of course, there are reasons why an AAC learner might not have their device with them all the time – it's on charge, or it's not wheelchair mounted yet, but sometimes there is no good reason.

Paper based AAC

There is one time when it's okay not to have the device available, and that's when you have paper based AAC available instead!

Paper based is sometimes called 'low-tech AAC' and there are lots of things that this includes, from symbol communication boards, communication books, to core vocabulary posters or activity specific language boards. It could also be a printed version of their electronic AAC.

Access at all times

Either way, individuals learning AAC must have access to their language at all times. Shockingly, one research study found that even when children using AAC were given opportunities to communicate, they only had access to their AAC system about half of the time they needed it. If they don't have it, they can't use it!

Getting Started

Make notes and problem solve. Start by simply making a note of times during the day when the AAC learner doesn't have access to their AAC system, and the reasons why this might be. Is the device on charge? Try to plan set times when the device will be charged, at a time when the AAC learner could have access to paper based AAC instead.

Paper based AAC. Make sure the AAC learner has a paper based alternative available. This might mean printing off the vocabulary from their electronic communication aid, or if there are specific activities when the communication aid isn't available, you could just print the relevant vocabulary.

AAC users need
access to their language
all the time



Add words



Once an AAC learner begins to use single words, you can start to support their language by showing them how to Add Words to what they have said to develop their language. For example, if they ask for more juice by saying MORE, you could use their communication aid to say MORE JUICE. If they see a car and say CAR, you could say LOOK, CAR, FAST CAR or RED CAR. If the AAC learner is starting to use two words together, you can do exactly the same. If they said MORE JUICE you could show them WANT MORE JUICE or even I WANT MORE, always just adding one or two more words to what they say.

Use their AAC to show them

It's important to use the individual's communication aid so that they don't just hear what you say, but they also see how they could say it too. Remember, you don't have to point to every single word whilst you speak. You can just point to the most important ones.

Just add one or two words

The aim is to use language that is just beyond the learner's current level of language, to support them to develop their language skills. Sometimes this is called scaffolding, because you are building support around the learner's current level of language, to bridge the gap between this, and more advanced language.

They don't need to repeat you

It's important not to expect the AAC user to repeat what you have said. The learner should feel as though we are confirming what they have said is correct, and showing them what else they could say. By asking them to repeat what we have said, the learner might think what they said was wrong. They might also not be able to repeat what you have said, particularly if the words you have used are new, and this can add unnecessary stress.

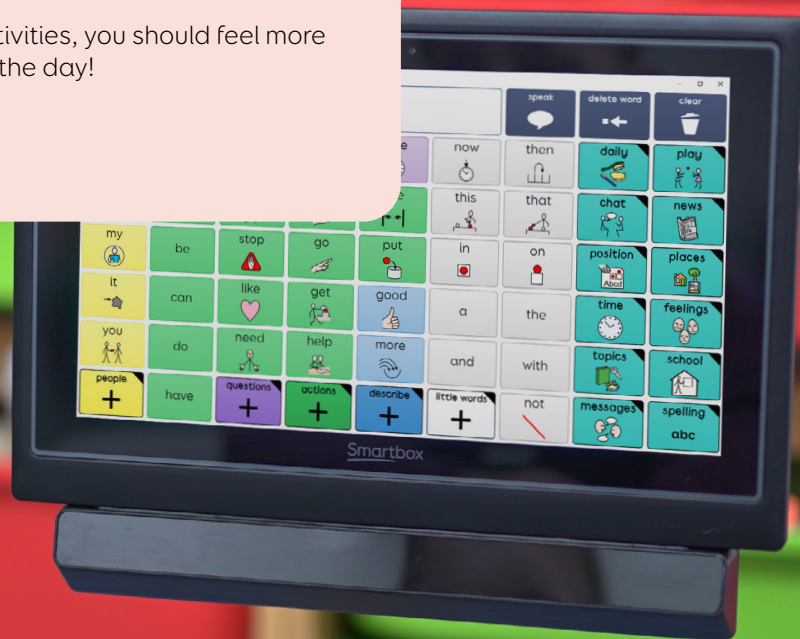
If the AAC user spontaneously repeats what you have said, of course that's great!

Getting Started

The best way to practice this strategy, is to choose a time or activity when you're going to practice adding words to what the AAC user says. Wait for them to say a word, then just add a word onto what they have said, using their AAC so you are also showing the learner where they can find the word you have added.

For example, if they say SHOES, you could say SHOES ON or CHANGE SHOES or NEW SHOES. If the learner says two words, like WANT SHOES, then add a third word, like YOU WANT SHOES or WANT SHOES ON.

Once you have practiced doing this in a few activities, you should feel more confident to try doing it more often throughout the day!





When a child is learning to talk, you often hear adults asking questions like “What’s that?” and “Can you say this?”. This happens to AAC learners a lot too.

Asking questions is testing, not teaching

So why do we ask questions we already know the answer to? Well, maybe we want to see if the AAC learner knows the answer, or even prove to someone else that they know. But by asking questions like this, we are not teaching language. We are testing. What if they don’t know the answer, or they do know the answer but don’t know how to say it with their communication aid? Will they feel sad, frustrated, confused, or less confident? Have we taught them how to say “I don’t know”?

Use comments instead!

This simple strategy is a great way to stop using questions, and start teaching language. To Comment you just need to say what you are thinking. There is no pressure on the AAC learner to respond, but you might find that they do more



when they aren’t being tested.

A great way to model language

Just as we saw with L for Language, we want to teach AAC learners language they can use naturally, in any situation, and enable them to have conversations. Commenting is a huge part of everyday conversations – we say what we think, what we have been doing, what we are going to do, and what is happening in that moment!

There are lots of different ways to make comments:

- Say what you are doing (e.g. "I am BRUSHing your HAIR" "I am OPENing the JAR")
- Say what they are doing (e.g. "you are putting a HAT ON", or "you are GOing on the BUS")
- Say what they are looking at (e.g. the doorbell rings and they look at the door, so you can say "WHO is at the door?" "let's GO and SEE")
- Say what they might want to say (e.g. if they look at a chocolate bar and smile, you could say "I think you LIKE CHOCOLATE" "I think YOU WANT it")

Remember you don't need to point to, or select, every single word. The capitalised words show the key words to select if you are just starting to teach AAC to someone who is at the very early stages of using it.

Getting Started

Don't ask a question – say the answer. This is a great way to get used to using commenting. For example, instead of pointing to a car and saying "what is that?", use their AAC to say "It's a CAR". Instead of saying "what colour is it?", use their AAC to say "it's RED". Instead of saying "can you find the word good?" just show them where it is and how to use it, saying "this is GOOD".

If you want to ask a question, comment to say some possible answers. Asking questions that we don't know the answer to is great – we want to know what the AAC learner thinks! Questions like "What do you want to do?" or "What do you think?". But, it can be really helpful to suggest what some answers might be, and it's a great opportunity to show the learner using their communication aid. For example, you might say "What do you think? Hmmm, maybe you think it is FUN or maybe you think it is BORING?" And it's okay if the learner chooses a different response to the ones you suggested!

Use the rule of thumb. When you are used to asking lots of questions, it can be really hard to stop! Start by trying to say four comments for every question – the rule of thumb. The thumb is your question, your fingers are comments! Spend 5-10 minutes each day doing this and it will get easier the more you practice.

Notes

Notes



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