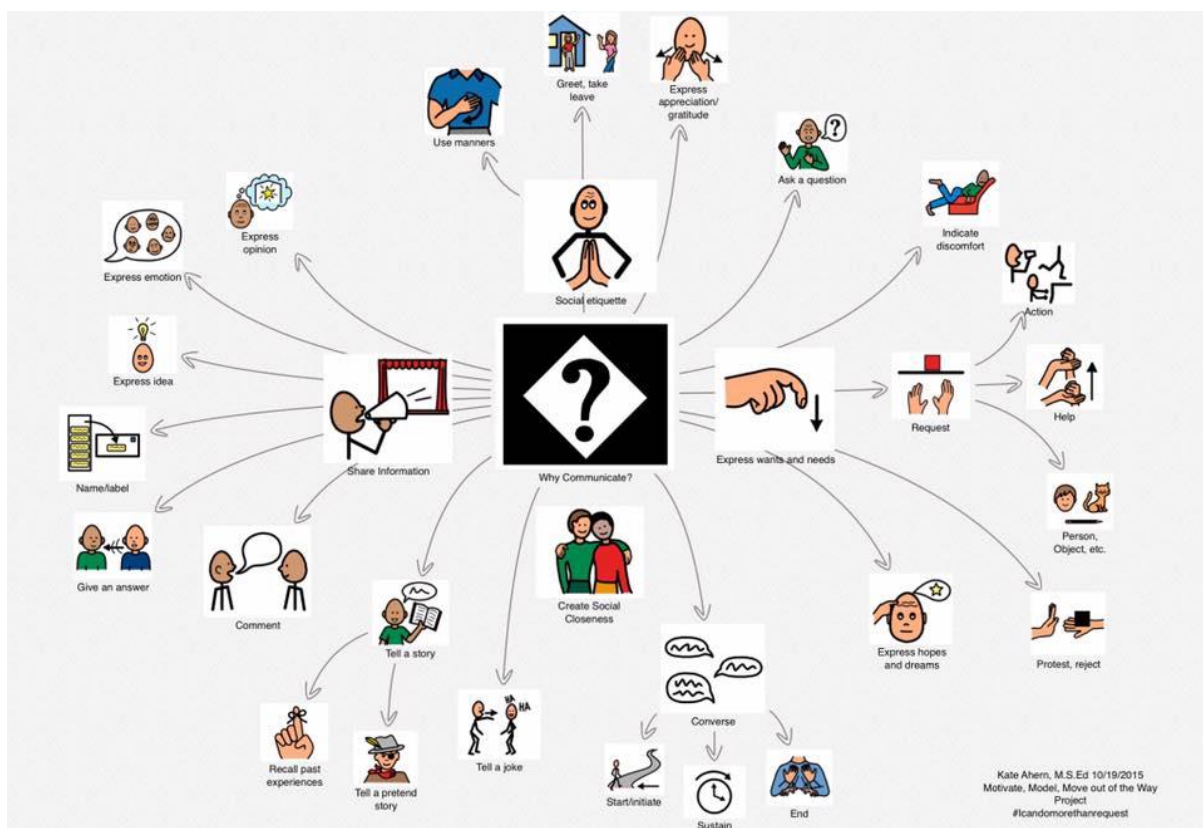


What is communication?

Communication is a way of sharing with someone what you are thinking. We all communicate in a variety of ways about a variety of things. Often when we think about communication for those with Complex Communication Needs (CCN) we tend to only think of communication as requesting. However, true communication is much more than this; it includes a range of communication functions. For example, to greet, ask and answer questions, relay information, protest, joke, complain, manipulate and express emotions.

Thank you to Kate Ahern¹ for making and sharing this great picture below demonstrating the many purposes of past communication.



What is AAC?

Augmentative and Alternative Communication is any means of communication that is not spoken word. If your child cannot communicate in all the above ways using their voice they should have access to a robust communication system. A robust system contains enough words to allow them to say what they want to say, when they want to say it, and to whom they want to say it. It is for those who are non-verbal, have limited words or have speech that is difficult for anyone outside the family to understand. Having access to AAC can also help to increase understanding and processing of language development.

Types of AAC.

There are three main categories of AAC - no tech, low tech and high tech.

No tech AAC is communication using only the body. It includes pointing, gesture, body language and signing, as well as some less desirable challenging behaviours.

Low tech AAC options include pen and paper, alphabet boards, communication boards and communication books.

High tech AAC includes anything that requires power. It ranges from simple switches to very sophisticated systems and everything in between such as mobile phones, tablets and computers.

All forms of AAC are valid methods of communication but the principal system should be a full and robust system, regardless of current communication abilities. Full systems include core words rather than just nouns and allow the user to make sentences. Words are categorised so that navigation to specific words is easier. Systems also allow room for growth, whilst keeping navigation autonomous.

Some examples of full language systems include Avaz, PODD, Proloquo2Go, Sonoflex, TalkTablet UK and TouchChat.

Language acquisition

Typically developing children are immersed in their native language. This means that they are spoken to in the language and they hear other people use their language round about them, in the shops, on the TV etc. They hear an average of 6,000 words per day. Normally between the ages of 1 and 2 years they will try the language for themselves in the form of babbling. A limited number of single words then follow and are added to over time. Most toddlers have a language explosion between the ages of 2 and 3 when the range of vocabulary increases significantly. Correct grammar follows over time and, by the age of 9, most children are considered to have a full grasp of their language.

For a child who only receives language input by a SLT for 30 mins per week, to attain the same level of input will take them over 700 years¹. Children with CCN are at a significant disadvantage which has little to do with learning difficulties or ability.

Presumed competence

It can be difficult to imagine that children with learning difficulties have the ability to learn such a complex system. This is where you have to learn to presume competence, and believe in their ability to learn and yours to teach them.

First described back in 1984 by Anne Donnellan², presumed competence refers to making the least dangerous assumption. If you have someone who is non-verbal you have two choices:

1. Teach AAC – give the person a full language, immerse them in it, model, allow them time to learn
2. Do not teach AAC

If you make the wrong choice, what is the worst thing that can happen?:

1. The person does not learn and you have wasted time
2. The person had the ability to learn but was denied the opportunity and so has to live without the ability to express themselves fully.

Number 2 is clearly the more dangerous.

The same paper discusses that any failings in teaching are down to instructional inadequacy rather than any failings by the person being taught. In other words, it is down to the team supporting the child to problem solve difficulties, not the person themselves. This means that in order to allow people with CCN the best chance to communicate they should be given access to robust systems.

Teaching AAC is essentially equivalent to learning a new language. It should run parallel to the development of typical language acquisition skills. There are zero prerequisites needed to introduce a comprehensive language system. If we treat learning AAC the same way as we teach babies their new language, it is clear to see that no skills are required before learning can begin. Being spoken to in that language often and for a long time before any expectation of skill development is a more natural way of language development.

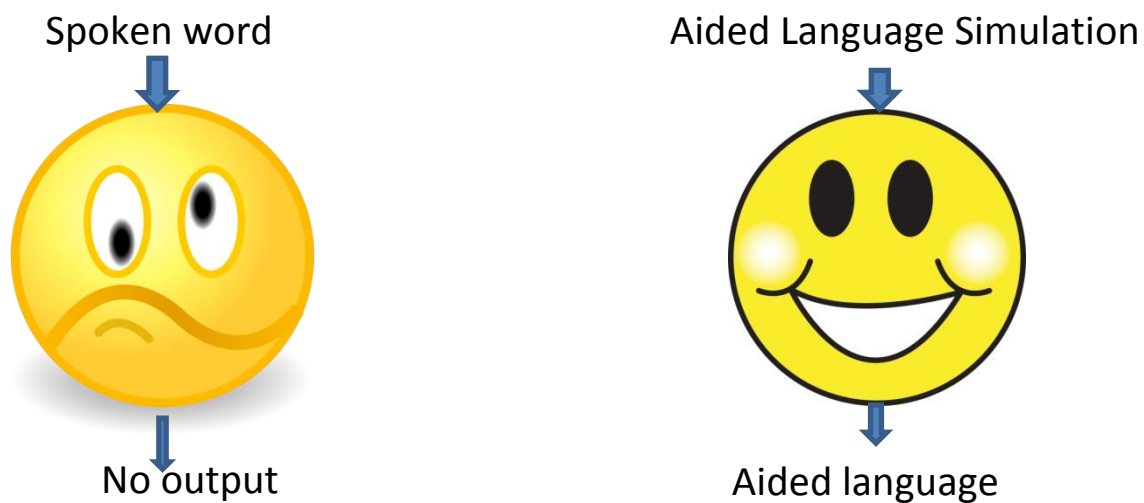
Why start now?

There are no pre-requisites for starting to learn about a new language, we start speaking to babies before they are even born. When you are introducing a full AAC system to someone for the first time, you are expecting that it can take at least two years before they will start using the language back, again similar to typical development of children, although fully verbal children will have much more exposure to their language. It is impossible to predict what your child will be capable of in two years, so you can start to teach their future language today, whilst supporting all the things and ways they can communicate now.

Aided Language Stimulation (Modelling)

Getting the communication systems in place is only the first stage of the process; the person with CCN will not become an AAC user unless they are taught what to do with their new system.

Aided language input is the act of modelling key words on an AAC device in a spoken phrase. As stated above, we should treat learning AAC like learning a new language. That means using the person's language to teach them how to respond to situations in everyday life using their system. Using oral communication to teach an AAC user is the equivalent of speaking to a baby in English and expecting them to talk back in French. The chances of learning successful communication are not high.



As noted earlier, we have to also consider the time it takes to fully learn a new language. So, if an AAC user only has access to language during a single Speech and Language session per week, it will take them an inordinate time to learn the language. As such, we need to model a lot, but how do we do that?

How to model

1. Start slowly, choosing four core words to model in natural contexts throughout the day, I, LIKE, NOT, MORE is the first set recommended by the ASF communication series⁸. First locate the four words in the device and model these words throughout the day; you can use them singly or together, although be careful to model only one or two words per sentence to begin with.

For example at dinner time:

Whilst you are enjoying your dinner model "I LIKE" whilst saying "I like my dinner".

Your child finishes and touches their plate, model MORE saying "oh I wonder would you LIKE MORE?" (or simply MORE)?

Someone leaves something – I do NOT LIKE that

During story time:

I LIKE it, this story is fun

Oh no, he is NOT nice

I have that too

2. Do not panic! To begin with, using an AAC system feels clunky and unnatural. It can be difficult and is certainly not as easy as speaking. However, over time it becomes easier to do and you get more comfortable. Once you can locate your words with ease and know when to use them, it is time to move onto another four words. Whilst you are restricting yourself from words until you are familiar with them, there is no limit to the variety of words that can be modelled to the AAC user. Just remember if your AAC user is only going to learn 50 words then make them words that count. Nouns are very limiting compared to other types of words.
You might choose a time of day to incorporate use of the AAC every day. You could choose bedtime as a calm time, dinner time as everyone is all together, or any other time that suits the family. (A time when you have any time constraints will not work, you do not need to add an extra element of pressure at busy times.) This can then be gradually built up introducing more core sets and other times when the AAC is always used.
3. Comment much more than question. Commenting is a much more natural method of communicating than questioning. However, it is very easy to get caught in the practice of questioning people who are nonverbal. Often the commenting that would happen with babies and other verbal people gets lost and communicating becomes an endless list of questions. When modelling AAC it is actually easier to comment than question. It means that modelling can be done with fewer words and also puts no pressure on the person learning the system to respond.
4. Use “think aloud” comments that reflect what the individual communicates with their body. Map that communication to their system. E.g. “I SEE you clapping your hands, I think you are saying you FEEL HAPPY.” Learners with CCN often need to hear how you are interpreting their body language. That way if you are wrong, they can try to be clearer. This means that you are showing the person a different way of expressing what they might be feeling but doesn’t compromise the system if you are wrong. They might have clapped their hands as they were retelling you a story about someone clapping their hands.
Putting words into a person’s mouth can belittle their meaning and can enforce that the system is still open to misinterpretation just like all their other ways of nonverbal communication.

5. All communication is valid, answer everything that the AAC user says/points to; this is the equivalent of babbling. When you respond, you teach that using the AAC system gets a positive response and it lets the learner know that their communication is listened to.
6. Don't forget to have something motivating to talk about. It is much more difficult to use AAC than the spoken word. If someone is going through the effort of using or learning AAC you should try your best to make the things they get to talk about interesting.
7. If there is a word that you are trying to model which is not on the system, add it in. If you are using a paper system write the word on and it can be added into the next version.
8. Their AAC should be thought of as a living document, something that will always grow with them. Don't stop modelling even when the user becomes proficient – it increases confidence if people are using the same language as you. Also, people adapt their language throughout their life and AAC users should be given this opportunity too.

Modelling with scanning

Scanning is required when the AAC user has no other physical access method to use their language. This means that the partner using the system with the person will navigate the system and ask the person to respond using a yes and/or no. For example in the grid below you would say

Do you want 1,2,3 or 4? You are looking away telling me no ok

Do you then want 5,6,7 or 8? Ok you looked at me, telling me yes. Do you want 5? 6? 7? – ok you looked at me you want 7.

1	5	9	13	17	21
2	6	10	14	18	22
3	7	11	15	19	23
4	8	12	16	20	24

You must assign meaning to all that they say e.g. if 7 happened to be spaceship and completely out of context (in your mind only). Wow a spaceship do you have something more to say about spaceships? If not, I think spaceships are really COOL. I WANT to GO on

one. Or anything else you can think of. Remember you do not know what the AAC user is thinking. If they are thinking of a movie about spaceships that they saw last night or telling you that their Aunt has joined NASA and you ignore it, you are teaching them their language is not effective.

It is important that you do model the pathways for scanning so that the person gets to understand who that works; equally it is ok to just model the words so that the context can stay relevant. It is a slower process to scan but it is highly effective for those that have no other option.

Yes and no

One of the most important communication things you can teach your child is to have a recognisable yes and no. There are many different ways to say yes and no other than a voice. It can be a look towards for yes and away for no, eyebrows up or down, other body language or you can use symbols, cards, wristbands. Whilst this list is almost endless it is worth remembering that a nod and a shake of the head are universal signs for yes and no so are the easiest for your child to be universally understood.

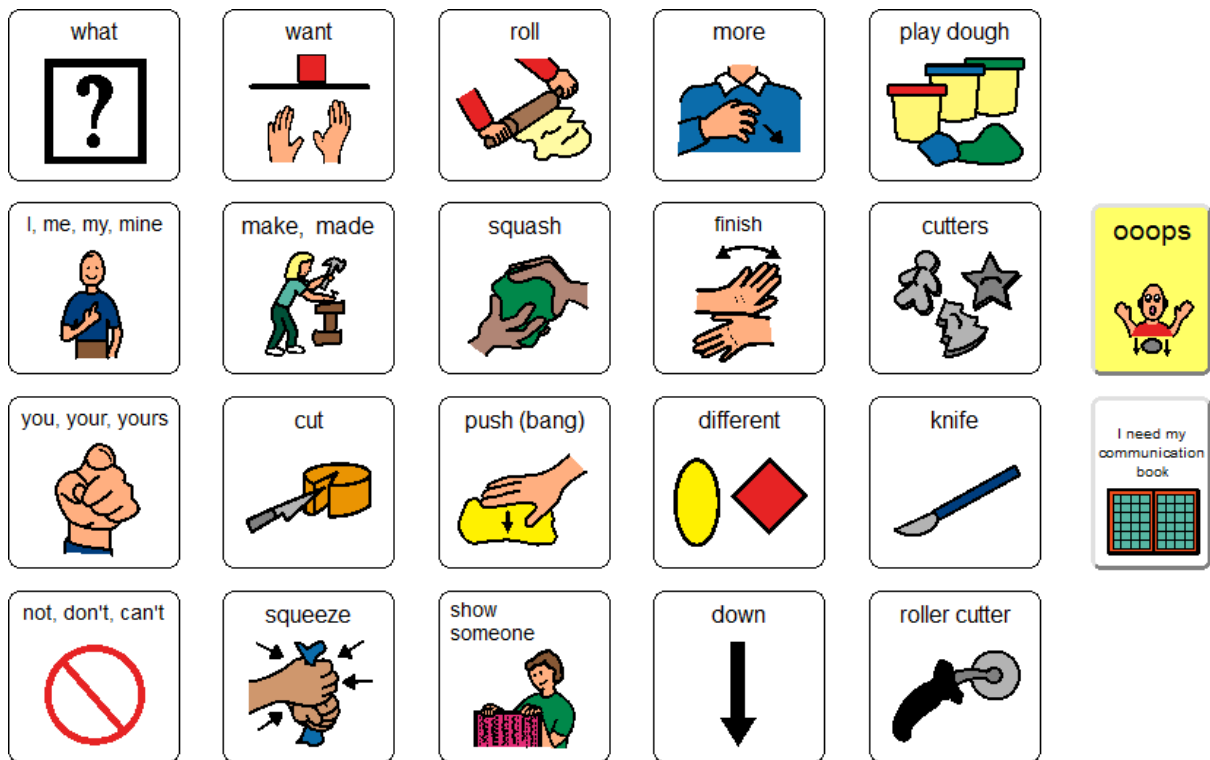
Once you have decided on an achievable movement for your child you need to teach and model to assign meaning to the yes and no. It is important to bear in mind the types of questions you ask and how easy they are to assign meaning to. Teaching a yes and no is different to modelling AAC where we should limit the number of questions we ask and comment using the system.

Kate Ahern has an excellent series on yes and no the first part is found here and there are links to the others on the page.

<http://teachinglearnerswithmultipleneeds.blogspot.co.uk/2012/11/the-yesno-series-part-one.html>

Aided Language Displays (ALD's)

ALD's are single sheets of a symbol based language. They may be activity based such as play dough, doll play or topic based such as days of the week or holidays. They are, by their very nature, limited and so should always contain a means to request access to the full communication system, modelling on solely ALD's also does not teach the navigation pathways in a book or device so a balance is required. The symbol set and lay out of the ALD used should be similar to the main language system. ALD's are often used in areas where it is difficult to take the whole book (e.g. swimming, bathroom), for those learning the language (parents and teachers included) and for specific topics. Below is an example of an ALD for play dough.



Homework

The most important thing to learn to do is to have access to AAC at all times during the day. Think about how you should carry it and if access to a book or app is inappropriate what can they access. Also consider how your child tells you they have something to say?

It is worth spending some time with a communication partner who is not the AAC user to have a conversation with them.

Under no circumstances would you ever ask your child to use the book especially as a test of whether they are suitable for it. You can think about trying this after 2 years use of continual modelling throughout the day.

Also never ever say anything negative about the system in front of the AAC user. Be polite, it's their voice.

Check out the ASF communication series it is a fabulous free resource and there is something for everyone in it.

<http://www.angelman.org/resources-education/communication-training-series/>