Augmentative and Alternative Communication

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Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) is a system to supplement or replace verbal communication. Augmentative communication is used to supplement or support limited verbal speech with gestures, facial expressions, body language or typing. Alternative communication is used to completely replace verbal speech output with a communication device. An AAC user is someone who has limited verbal speech or is unable to use verbal speech to communicate. AAC users can be individuals with Down Syndrome, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Cerebral Palsy, cognitive or physical impairments, Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, or other neurodegenerative diseases, and brain injuries.

Types of AAC

1. No Tech: Use of body, no extra equipment
   a. Gestures
   b. Sign language
   c. Facial expressions
2. Low Tech: Equipment without technology
   a. Picture communication system
   b. Core vocabulary board
   c. Alphabet board
   d. Writing
3. High Tech: Systems with technology
   a. Non-dedicated device (adapted to use for communication)
      i. Tablet with communication software (ex. TouchChat, Lamp, Proloquo2go)
      ii. Computer
   b. Dedicated communication device (developed for the purpose of communication)
      i. Speech Generating Device
         1. Single message recording device (ex. BIGmack)
         2. Multi-message recording device (ex. GO Talk)
         3. Tablet with multiple access modes such as eye gaze tracker, or switches (ex. Tobii Dynavox)

How to evaluate to determine the best communication system for the AAC User

1. Areas to evaluate:
   a. Motor Learning- Motor capabilities and limitations to access the system.
   b. Linguistic Learning- Receptive and expressive language skills, and the understanding and use of language.
   c. Social Learning- Social communication skills and the desire to communicate.

2. Common Assessments Used:
   a. Communication Matrix
   b. Functional Communication Profile - Revised
   c. Augmentative and Alternative Communication Profile
   d. Wisconsin Assistive Technology Institute
   e. AAC Skills Assessment Protocol

Treatment

1. Access- Individuals who benefit from AAC should have access to their system at all times regardless of activity, behavior or current skill level.

2. Model- Everyone who communicates with an AAC user should be trained with and know how to model with the communication system. You would model using the communication system while you talk to show how it can be used. For example if you said, "I am hungry." You can model the words "hungry," "eat," "go eat."

3. Core vocabulary- Efforts should be focused on teaching and modeling core vocabulary (words used routinely) vs. fringe vocabulary (words used for specific situations).

4. Communication Opportunities- Consistently provide communication opportunities for AAC users throughout their day for different language functions (ex. Greeting, making requests/refusals, answering questions, describing feelings).

5. Prompting- Prompt as little as needed and move from least support to most support as needed. Wait at least 15 seconds after each prompt to allow the AAC user to process information.
   a. Pause expectantly after an initial comment or question to the AAC user
   b. Look at or point to the system.
   c. Use an indirect prompt such as "I wonder what you're thinking"
   d. Use a direct prompt and tell the AAC user to communicate with their system or use a sentence strater "You want to eat.."
   e. Model on the device what the AAC user could have said.

6. How to elicit communication
   a. Model target words or core vocabulary frequently throughout the day for extended period of time (minimum 1 week)
   b. Engage and appeal to the interests of the AAC user by using communication devices during preferred and motivating activities.
   c. Use the communication device yourself to narrate or model language.

Augmentative and alternative communication systems assist individuals who are unable to speak. AAC can increase participation in daily activities and communication with others. It can also decrease frustration that stems from lack of ability to communicate needs, wants, thoughts, and feelings.

Additional Resources/ Helpful websites:

- https://communicationmatrix.org/
- http://www.wati.org/
- https://praacticalaac.org/
- https://disabilityinfo.org/fact-sheet-library/assistive-technology/augmentative-and-alternative-communication-aac-resources/

References

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. (n.d.). Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC). https://www.asha.org/public/speech/disorders/AAc/.

Clarke, V. (n.d.). *Procedures for AAC and Speech Generating Device Evaluation and Device Trials*. Praactical AAC. https://praacticalaac.org/.

Shannon Werbeckes. (n.d.). *AAC Training Guide*. Speechy Musings. https://speehymusings.com/.