
Module 2: Frequently Asked Questions

This module is number 2 in the package “Supporting Communication through AAC” published by SCOPE.

Will the use of signing, a symbol chart or a VOCA discourage or stop my child from speaking?

This is a frequently asked question, and we can assure you that there is absolutely no evidence of this ever happening. In fact the reverse is more likely to be the case. Many children who are having difficulty in speaking begin to feel tense whenever they need to speak because they have experienced people not understanding what they say. When they have a communication chart/book or a Voice Output Communication Aid (VOCA) they feel less pressured and their speech often develops more readily and/or becomes more easily understood.

How long does it take to become an efficient and effective communicator using AAC?

This is also a question that is frequently asked but on which there is little if any data. Panton (1989) relates the case of an adult man who suffered an accident that left him without speech but otherwise cognitively unimpaired. This man took 200 hours of teaching by a speech and language therapist (SLT), experienced in the use of Voice Output Communication Aids (VOCAs), to learn to use a symbol based communication system (Minspeak). The 200 hours does not include the time that the man worked on the device on his own. Since this man had full language and was an experienced communicator before his accident, we must accept that learning to use one of the symbol based VOCAs will be a lengthy business for any child, particularly those with additional disabilities. This has particular implications for service and support issues.

The creation of communication charts/books takes a long time and needs to be an ongoing process, as they need to be revised and updated regularly. The use of computer technology, however, makes this much easier these days. There are obviously significant time implications for staff in the creation of a communication chart/book, as well as the time needed working with the individual to familiarise them with the vocabulary and its organisation.

What is the Communication Aids Project (CAP) and can it help my child?

The CAP project was established in 2001 and has been extended for a further two years until 2006. During this period it will have had access to £20 million of funding. Its aim is to increase awareness and knowledge about assistive technology as well as to provide equipment to meet the specific needs of children.

The CAP project has a website <http://cap.becta.org.uk/> and more information about the project, application forms, news and case studies is available on this website.

There is an expectation that schools and LEAs will contribute to the CAP process by allowing staff to participate in assessments as well as supporting the provision of equipment. This may be through the provision of peripherals such as printers, scanners, switches and/or low cost VOCAs. There are insurance and extended warranty issues (where appropriate) which need to be considered by parents, schools and LEAs.

Parents, therapists and teachers can refer any school aged pupil to the project. The referral, if accepted, will be passed to one of the six CAP centres. An assessment of the pupil's needs will be undertaken by a team under the guidance or supervision of the CAP centre. Equipment recommended as a result of the assessment may be funded by the CAP project.

Applications to the CAP project must be made on-line via the CAP website. If you cannot access the website you will need to ask a teacher or therapist to do it on your behalf.

How can we meet other AAC users?

Role models – young adults with similar disabilities and preferably using the same communication aid – can be excellent communication partners since they are trusted to “tell it how it is” and yet provide relevant tips and insights. Since they have “been there and done that”, got a job, had a family, they can prove it can be done and can provide a bridge of realism between where the user is now and where everyone expects them to reach.

To find the role models you are very dependent on teachers, therapists and suppliers of communication aids. They are the people who have met AAC users and will be aware of those who are willing to come and share experiences. It may also be worthwhile contacting Communication Matters via their website (<http://www.communicationmatters.org.uk/>).

Do all speech and language therapists (SLTs) know about AAC?

All SLTs receive some training on AAC as undergraduates. However, the amount of time spent on this area is relatively minor in comparison to other areas covered. This means that while all SLTs know something about AAC, they will often have very little practical knowledge and expertise in choosing signs, symbols and VOCAs, and very few of them have experience in supporting an AAC user to become a really efficient and effective communicator.

Many more therapists are becoming aware of AAC as a result of the CAP project and when they identify a pupil who may benefit from AAC they can approach one of the CAP centres for help and advice or one of the communication aids centres.

What is a Communication Passport and will one help my child?

Many AAC users report the “belief” problems they face in moving from one environment to another. Some teachers and therapists appear unable to accept that the AAC user can understand and communicate effectively and insist on assessment routines and/or starting them on simpler activities and materials than the AAC user is used to working with, until they prove their abilities. In other situations the new teacher/therapist has difficulty in setting up the equipment in the correct way for the user, resulting in a deterioration of the user's performance and a spiral downwards in the belief in their reported abilities.

To overcome these problems a “passport system” ([Module 3 Section 10](#)) has been proposed by Sally Millar, an SLT at the CALL Centre in Edinburgh. The passport includes photographs of the user's setup, video footage of them using their equipment in a range of situations – demonstrating their physical use as well as their communicative abilities – examples of their written work, certificates and other relevant information. The process has been used for over 10 years with great success in many schools.

Provision of these passports should smooth the passage of the young person as they move from one environment or phase of their life to another. For further information please consult [Module 3 Section 10](#) in this package on communication passports.

Can you get qualifications in the use of AAC?

To provide a structure for the teaching of AAC and to provide recognition of the time and energy that the user must invest in becoming an efficient communicator (the equivalent of learning a second language), AAC users can now obtain City and Guilds qualifications in Effective Augmentative and Alternative Communication, Course Number 3715-01. This qualification does provide tangible recognition of a skill and ability and credits time spent on this activity, it may be particularly important for those who are unlikely to obtain other publicly recognised qualifications. Please consult the module “Lifelong Learning” ([Module 8](#)), which forms a basis for this qualification.

Is it true that equipment must be returned to the LEA when the child leaves school?

Where equipment has been paid for by an LEA education service it may be reclaimed when the child leaves school, even if the child is going on to further education. Equipment funded by the CAP project remains with the pupil and can continue to be used by them in college, work or whatever environment they progress to after school.

Where the child's equipment needs updating, its removal can be a blessing if it galvanizes someone into action to provide new up-to-date equipment. This in turn can bring fresh problems since new equipment will, at a minimum, need to be personalised to the needs of the user and the user will need training in the use of this new device. All this occurs at a time when the user is losing the support network that has been relied on through school years, and this network is difficult to replace.

Every child with a Statement of Special Educational Needs has a yearly review and a Transition (14+) review at school in the term immediately following their fourteenth birthday. Everyone who is supporting the child within the school system – teachers, therapists, educational psychologist, parents – is invited to these reviews and it is advisable for the parents and/or SLT to raise the issue of the provision of equipment that may be withdrawn when the child leaves school at the Transition review. By definition it will not be funded by LEAs and therefore funding will need to be sought from CAP (provided the young person remains at school), Health, Social Services or a charity. This will normally take some time to organise and is therefore best started around this time to allow for the cycle of fundraising, assessment, purchase, personalisation and training that will be necessary to be completed before the young person leaves school.

What competencies are needed to be an effective communicator using AAC?

A very experienced therapist in the USA (Janice Light) identified four competencies – operational, linguistic, social and strategic. Operational and linguistic competencies will be addressed by all therapists and teachers since they are concerned with the basic use of any VOCA.

Operational Competence (operating the communication system – communication chart, book and/or VOCA) covers:

- access methods, speed, transmission accuracy.
- how to find and activate words and phrases.
- speaking word by word or in sentences.

Linguistic Competence (the language) covers:

- range of communication function.
- balance of positive and negative vocabulary.
- provision of vocabulary for a range of people and situations.

What may not have been addressed in the school environment are the social and strategic competencies.

Social competencies address such issues as:

- the niceties of breaking into group discussions
- remaining on subject.
- moving the conversation on to a new topic.
- standing up for your rights.
- asking people to face you rather than look over your shoulder at your communication aid.

Strategic competencies address issues such as:

- which communication methods to use when (dysarthric speech or VOCA).
- different styles of communication for different communication partners and situations.
- how to indicate the desire to add something at that point in the conversation but prepare the full message without holding up the discussion.

Are there any groups that we can join for parents of pupils using AAC?

One Voice <http://www.1voice.info/> is a network and support organisation for children and families using communication aids. Their website says “1 Voice takes a family and social perspective on communication and recognises the great need for adult role models to inspire children and families alike. 1 Voice promotes families supporting each other to overcome the isolation that being unable to speak can bring.” 1 Voice does not give any advice on communication aids.

Are there any other AAC organisations that are worth joining?

Communication Matters <http://www.communicationmatters.org.uk/> is a UK national charitable organisation whose members are concerned with the augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) needs of people with complex communication issues. Communication Matters is also known as ISAAC (UK) – the UK Chapter of the International Society for Augmentative and Alternative Communication (ISAAC) – and is a core member of the Communications Forum.

Communication Matters supports people who use AAC, work with or live with someone who uses AAC. They provide 3 or 4 journals a year, a variety of useful leaflets, a yearly conference, some small grants, and liaise with suppliers of communication aids to promote and publicise communication aid roadshows.

ISAAC <http://www.isaac-online.org/> has the same aims as Communication Matters but with an international perspective.

For other websites and useful addresses please consult the module “Contacts, Web Resources and Discussion Groups” ([Module 12](#))

How can I integrate all the equipment the child/pupil/individual has?

In the early stages of schooling the individual components of assistive technology – wheelchair, communication aid, writing aid (computer) and environmental control – often remain as separate items. As the children become older, particularly children in mainstream schools, this equipment needs to be integrated so that each “talks” to the other where this is appropriate. Thought will also need to be given to how the written communication is achieved

– is it by direct printing from the communication aid, from a communication aid to a computer and hence to a printer, or directly into a computer? With modern technology, wires to connect to a printer, or indeed between switches and a VOCA or computer, are no longer necessary, thus allowing the user to move freely between activities.

This is also the time to consider the provision of environmental controls – intercoms, control of the front door, telephone access – as well as control of the TV, video, CD player etc.

Children being educated in the 21st century will be fully computer and Internet literate. In today’s world the linking of the able young person to email and the Internet is essential since it will provide them with greater independence through access to information, contacts and a method of private communication, some independent leisure activities, as well as a possible source of employment.

Can you get service contracts/extended warranties on communication aids?

Yes you can, and provision must be made for support in the event of a system failure. System failure, by its nature, is unpredictable, but when it occurs the user needs help immediately. Purchasing the service warranty of the communication aid supplier can ameliorate this problem; it is recommended that these are purchased at the time of the initial purchase of the aid. Some of these warranties provide 24-hour service and replacement devices where repairs will take more than 24 hours. The maintenance, service and hot line support of suppliers/manufacturers is a crucial issue in the selection of a communication aid for an able independent user, since this is likely to be the only type of help that can be made available to them quickly.

It is also crucial that a backup of the vocabulary is kept somewhere safe in school so that this backup can be used to resurrect a device in the case of a system failure. (The user should also be keeping a backup at home but this is not a belt and braces scenario, since when things go wrong they usually do so with abandon!)

Change in focus of communication method

Where the AAC communicator

- is relying on signing,
- or is using a communication chart/book,
- or is given a VOCA,
- or has not become a successful independent communicator using a VOCA with a word by word sentence construction approach, a change from one type of communication to another in different situations needs to be considered. In addition, when the child changes from school to the world beyond, this may necessitate a change in communication style. Schools are closed environments where the child is known, allowances made and the focus is on supporting learning. The world outside is more open and far less tolerant and knowledgeable.

Signing is an effective method of communication in a context where everyone (or at least most people) understands signing. In the world beyond school, however, few of the people that the signer will encounter will understand signing. Additional forms of communication that can be understood by anyone will need to be introduced.

If a VOCA user is unable to construct meaningful utterances on a word by word basis, despite appropriate training and support, it may be appropriate to move to a whole message/phrase/sentence system. While the youngster is in school, the focus is naturally on literacy based skills, and teachers may have difficulty in separating out appropriate literacy and face-to-face communication strategies. A teacher’s natural instinct is to continue to work on word by word constructions but this is not necessarily the most effective strategy for communication.

Once the youngster leaves the school environment, unless they go on to a specialist FE placement, they will not receive the continuous training that will maintain these literacy skills, let alone develop them. A different communication strategy – possibly whole phrases – may therefore need to be devised and taught, preferably while the youngster is still in school.

Psychological issues

Inevitably the young person will come to address the issues of their disabilities, their sexual feelings and their future. This is a stressful and difficult time for all young people especially those with disabilities; it is particularly awkward/difficult for youngsters with communication impairments since it is more difficult for them to “voice” their feelings, fears, frustrations, emotions and anxieties. It is also more difficult to address these issues with other young people with similar experiences since there are fewer of them around. It is important that vocabulary to address these issues is available long before it is actually needed and that opportunities to discuss these issues are presented appropriately and sensitively. Acolug, ([Module 12 Discussion groups](#)) an email discussion forum, which was created for the exchange of ideas, information and experiences on augmentative communication by people from all over the world, may be an appropriate place to do this.

Staff competencies

It may be helpful to inform AAC users of the very helpful staff training resources – including videos – available from the University of Stirling (Murphy and Scott 1995, “Attitudes and Strategies towards AAC: A training package for AAC users and carers”, ISBN 1 85769 0281). These resources address issues raised by AAC users themselves about the way they are, and would like to be, treated, and are an excellent resource for awareness raising and staff training.

Motivation

We can be under no illusion that learning to become an efficient, effective AAC communicator is anything other than demanding and time consuming. If the user is not motivated to put in the effort and is happy to accept others making decisions on their behalf and communicating for them, this is difficult to overcome. Experience, rather than hard evidence, suggests that if a child is not making good progress by the age of 12 years, then they are likely to fall into a black-hole/morass of the teenage years when progress with the non-effective communicator is slow. There seems to be a group of youngsters who simply do not “take off” during their early teens but who sometimes make a late surge as they leave school or soon afterwards. It is difficult to know whether this is because they are no longer surrounded by others who understand them, the need not to be different from their peers is less critical, or they realise the limitations of their lives without effective communication. If the youngster is thought to be able and there is no obvious reason why progress has not been made, then a watching brief with the hope that progress will occur in early adulthood is a possibility.

Beware of having too high expectations too soon

There is a tendency among family and friends to have high expectations of the user as soon as the assistive technology equipment has been provided. The user is often still learning to use the new equipment, maybe struggling to learn a switch scanning procedure and yet they are expected to be performing like Stephen Hawking. These expectations can contribute to the youngster being turned against the technology. While access methods are being learnt, and familiarization with the rest of the equipment is being gained, the cognitive level of the work should be undemanding. People are started off with carefully selected cause and effect software so that the tasks are fun and easy to achieve. With an intellectually able user the rate of progression through the software to that of an appropriate cognitive level will be fast – but success breeds success and it is better to start low and run up the ladder than to try and start half way up and fall off!

The “best”/ most high powered devices are not always the best for your child!

Choosing the device that Stephen Hawking uses is not necessarily going to set your child onto the path of becoming a Cambridge Professor! You know that, but it is easy to assume that your child will do best with the most powerful device available. Trust us when we say it may be better for your child to quickly outgrow a device but really achieve success than to spend hours with a complicated device that will grow with him and yet rarely experience the power of speech because the device is so complicated to use.