

Alternative/augmentative communication (AAC)

What is alternative/augmentative communication (AAC)?

AAC is a form of communication which supplements spoken communication or substitutes for it. AAC does this either by means of a particular device (assistive communication) or by means of a system – signing or symbols (non-assistive communication). AAC is also broadly divided into high-tech and low-tech communication aids or systems.

High-tech aids are usually typewriter- or computer-based aids using a keyboard and visual display, and may have voice. The voice may be real (an actual recording of a person's voice) or synthetic (an artificial voice).

The keyboard may be QWERTY (as on a normal typewriter), alphabetic or display symbols instead of letters. The latter is used for those who do not have literacy skills – the child or adult does not have to be able to read in order to use a communication aid. Many aids with a scanning device can be operated by a single switch for those with very limited movement such as knee, head or eye movements.

It is also possible to vary the number and complexity of the symbols and to combine these to produce phrases and sentences. Most aids can also store a number of phrases and sentences which can be accessed by a single key press.

It is vital that a specialist assessment is made by a professional experienced in AAC before any device or system is recommended, whether it is high or low-tech.

Low-tech aids usually take the form of pointing boards or frames, or small Filofax or dictionary-type aids, all of which can be personalised to meet the client's needs. Again letters, symbols or pictures can be used.

Symbol systems may use pictorial representations (such as Rebus) or abstract symbols (such as Blissymbolics), which are pointed to or indicated on a computer screen.

'Magic' slates and notebooks for writing are another low-tech aid.

Signing systems can be simple, with gestural representation of a word, such as Makaton, or complex including grammatical signs, such as Paget-Gorman or British Sign Language.

References

Baumgart, D, Johnson, J, & Helmstetter, E (1990), *Augmentative and alternative communication systems for persons with moderate and severe disabilities*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes

Horwood, W (1988), *Skallagrigg*. Harmondsworth: Penguin

Nolan, C (1999), *Under the eye of the clock*. London: Phoenix

Rush, W (1986), *Journey out of silence*. Lincoln, NE: Media Publishing and Marketing

Southgate, T, & Cochrane, G (Eds.) (1990), *Communication equipment for disabled people*. Oxford: Oxford Health Authority

Please note: Afasic does not hold copies of any referenced material. However, it may be obtained via academic libraries.

Other relevant Glossary Sheets

- Specific language impairment (1)
- Articulation (10)
- Dyspraxia (18)
- Dysarthria (21)

Other organisations which can help

ACE/ACCESS Centre

1 Broadbent Road
Watersheddings
Oldham
OL1 4HU
Tel: 0161 627 1358

ACE Centre Advisory Trust

92 Windmill Road
Headington
Oxford
OX3 7DR
Tel: 01865 763508/759800

Makaton Vocabulary Development Project

31 Firwood Drive
Camberley
Surrey
GU15 3QD
Tel: 01276 61390

Paget Gorman Society

2 Downlands Bungalow
Downlands Lane
Smallfield
Surrey
RH6 9SD
Tel: 0134 284 2308

Royal National Institute for the Deaf

19-23 Featherstone Street
London
EC1Y 8SL
Tel: 0808 808 0123 (freephone)
Fax: 020 7296 8199
Textphone: 0808 808 9000 (freephone)

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