Augmentative & Alternative Communication (AAC) - An Overview

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What is Augmentative & Alternative Communication (AAC)?

The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) defines AAC as:

"…Attempts to study and when necessary compensate for temporary or permanent impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions of persons with severe disorders of speech-language production and/or comprehension, including spoken and written models of communication." (2005, p. 1)

AAC methods provide a means of self-expression for individuals whose oral communication is severely restricted. AAC allows these individuals to express their wants, needs, ideas, and opinions. Quality of life and independence are often greatly improved when AAC is introduced as these patients are able to participate in more and more daily communication exchanges.

Who Uses AAC?

AAC methods supplement deficient oral communication, so anyone with impairment in this area may benefit from their use. Populations commonly served by AAC include those with mental retardation, autism, cerebral palsy, and developmental apraxia of speech. Some individuals with acquired impairments such as multiple sclerosis, amytrophic lateral sclerosis, traumatic brain injury, stroke, and spinal cord injury may also use AAC.

Types of AAC

AAC can be low-technology or high-technology in nature. Low-technology methods of AAC are as simple as notepads and message boards; the individual can write or draw concepts to share with the communication partner. High-technology methods of AAC include computers and electronic communication devices. These methods have more advanced features and can be specialized for the needs of the individual.

AAC can also be classified as gestural or gestural-assisted. When using gestural AAC, no instruments or external aids are used. However, gestures and patterned movements may be accompanied by some speech. Examples of gestural AAC include pantomime, American Sign Language, and eye-blink encoding. Gestural-assisted AAC involves combining movements with an instrument or message-display device. The individual is able to use the device to convey messages that are more complex or are difficult to express using gestures.

Gestural-Assisted AAC: Communication Devices

Mechanical devices are popular with individuals with communication impairments because they can be used for a wide range of communicative functions. These devices are run by special software and generate printed messages or speech. A trained specialist can help clients select the best AAC device for his or her individual preferences and needs.

When using a message type device, the individual types a message into the device using a keyboard. With some devices, the message appears on a viewing screen for the communication partner to view. Other devices utilize speech output so that the communication partner can hear the message.

Many current high-technology AAC devices have display screens with icons that the user selects to express his or her message. A professional collaborates with the individual as well as his or her frequent

communication partners (e.g. family, friends, caregivers, etc.) about the individual's vocabulary needs. Icons are then chosen for the device based on the user's unique needs and interests. Once the device is programmed, icons can be activated in isolation on in conjunction with other icons based on the complexity of the individual's language abilities.

Additional Resources

The most appropriate method of AAC for individuals with communication impairments varies greatly depending on unique strengths, areas of need, interests, and lifestyles. Therefore, it is important to visit with a trained professional, such as a speech-language pathologist specializing in AAC, before making a decision in this area. Below are websites for anyone who would like more information in this area:

www.augcominc.com

www.closingthegap.com

www.isaac-online.org

http://aac.unl.edu/yaack

www.asha.org

References

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