

YOUNG CHILDREN WITH AAC NEEDS

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The topic of AAC for young pre-schoolers tends to generate more questions than answers. Is it fair to give up on verbal communication at such an early age? How reliable will the testing be? How long will the device last and will the child outgrow the system too quickly? What is the most important vocabulary to include? If they cannot talk, will they ever be able to read?

When working with young children a multi-modality approach is essential. Parents and peers and professionals should not give up on the possible development of a verbal output system even if that system is a reduced one limited to key words and/or phrases. It is also essential that they provide alternative outlets for expression as early as possible in order to provide opportunities for peer interactions, for learning new information, for identifying wants and needs, and for controlling and exploring the environment. Research has shown over and over again that the availability of augmentative systems (such as signs, pictures, devices) *supports* rather than minimizes both receptive and expressive language development.

The assessment process for any individual in need of an augmentative communication system is an extensive one. With a young child there are even more considerations; formal test norms often fall short in truly analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of a child's communication system.

Beukelman (1992) strongly supports the use of the Participation Model in the assessment process. A young child's needs should be assessed in natural contexts and compared to their peers in the same contexts including predictable routines, during play, in contexts at home, in the community and in the classroom.

The ability to make choices is one of the foundation blocks of communication development. Young children learn to make choices for a wide variety of benefits. Making choices gives a child feelings of control, participation, and exploration in addition to just selecting preferences. As choice making options are expanded, it is also critical to develop and expand other early developing language skills including initiating interactions, turn-taking skills, use of social language rituals, terminating interactions, gaining attention through language, etc.

Emergent literacy research shows that many children learn to read and write better through active participation in literacy activities. The home and school environments provide opportunities for literacy development which Lloyd (1997) identifies as Extrinsic Factors. For young children needing AAC, the Intrinsic Factors must be given careful consideration and adaptations and accommodations must be provided so that these children will not experience restricted opportunities for learning. His list of intrinsic factors includes physical impairment, sensory/perceptual impairment, language impairment, and cognitive impairment.

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