

Getting started with Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)

Getting started with a new AAC system (e.g. symbols, a communication book or an electronic device for example) is an exciting prospect and one which can be daunting. It's an exciting time and you will of course have lots of questions on your child's AAC journey. Here are some top tips to help you to get started:



1. Creating a habit

First thing's first: get used to taking your communication system with you wherever you go. As with all habits, this may take a while (you already have lots to remember) so try to pick some key places to take it with you to start with, if that makes things easier. At this point, there is absolutely no pressure to use the system, just make sure you always have it with you. Try to think of the system as your child's voice. Where will they need to take their voice? Answer = everywhere. In the school bag, in the car, to grandma's house, to the supermarket. Even if your child isn't using it, keep it somewhere easily accessible where they can see it. Children need to learn they have the option to use their voice whenever they choose to which will help them to really value their AAC system in the long term.

2. Talk AAC to me

Your child's AAC system is new to you and new to your child. Don't worry about whether they are using it to communicate. The best way for your child to learn the words in their system is for everyone around your child to become familiar with the layout and how it works. Use your child's AAC system when you talk to them, pointing to the symbols as you say the words. Keep



it simple and point to 1 symbol at a time. You can build up to longer phrases later.

Spend some time getting to know your child's system. Start with the front page as this usually contains the most frequently used or 'core' words such as 'more', 'go' and 'stop'. Visit our AAC homepage for ideas on getting started with '**core words of the week**'.

3. Make communicating fun!

Try to make the interactions you have with your child using their system as motivating for them as you can. If your child loves cars, talk to them about cars using their communication system (such as a cars page within their communication book). If they love singing, make sure you have the system out when choosing songs and singing along. The more fun they are having, the more likely they are to want to interact with you. When playing your games, have a think about which words you can use on your child's system to help them to develop their language skills.

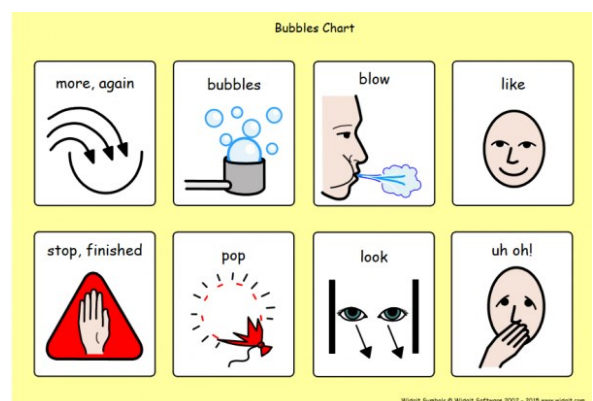


4. Modelling

'Modelling' means demonstrating to the AAC user how to use their communication system and is one of the most effective strategies for teaching your child how to use their new system. To help your child to express when they are hurt or in pain, they need to see how you would do this using their system. Say the word (e.g. 'hurt') aloud as you point to the symbol within a real-life moment e.g. when they have fallen down. Over time, this shows your child how they can communicate this. This strategy can be used across any AAC systems: signs, symbols, switches, anything! If your child is already using single word messages (e.g. to say 'banana'), the adult might use 2 symbols to say 'peel banana', to show the child how to expand their phrase. In effect we are showing the child how to use longer phrases or how to use different words to mean the same thing, in the same way that we would teach a typically developing child to talk using words. If you are looking for ideas in how to model language, see our handout '[match+1](#)' and '[talking at your child's level](#)' under our 'Talking' section.

Here is an idea of how to model language using bubbles:

- Adult says 'ready, steady...' and points to 'go!' as they say 'go' and blows the bubbles.
- The bubbles don't work, adult models 'oops!'





5. Think about why

We communicate for so many different reasons! Asking questions, refusing, sharing news, greeting, requesting, sharing opinions. It is important to teach your child how to use their system or device for all of these different functions. It is easy to get stuck on focusing the child to make requests e.g. for favourite toys or snacks. It is equally important for us to model different functions of communication e.g. sharing 'I think it's funny!', asking 'who's turn?', protesting with 'stop it!' and greeting friends with 'good morning' to help them to be an effective communicator.

6. Make the AAC device personalised for your child

As this AAC system is your child's voice, it needs to be personalised for them. Your Speech and Language Therapist may provide you with the initial system but all adults working with the child should take responsibility to keep the vocabulary in the system as up to date for the child as possible. This includes removing old, irrelevant vocabulary and frequently adding new vocabulary that is relevant for the child e.g. recent holidays, trips, hobbies, etc. This does not need to be done by your speech and language therapist though they can help with this.

Making the book personalised for your child will keep them motivated to use it with you. Think about adding jokes, slang words, names of favourite people and places (anything they love to communicate about should go on their system).