

## What Is Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) and who can use it?



Passing a note in class.



Pointing to the unpronounceable item on the menu at a restaurant.



Waving to a friend who is across the room.



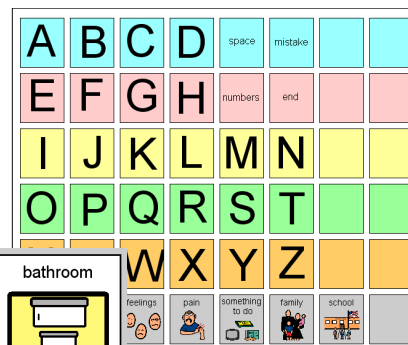
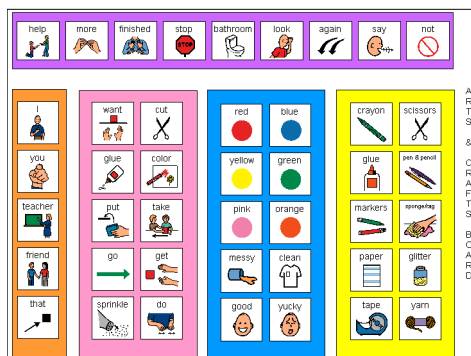
A child's face lighting up while she unwraps a new toy.

In all of these examples, people are communicating without speaking. They are communicating using augmentative and alternative communication (AAC). Basically, AAC is any method of communication that is used in addition to or instead of speech. Augmentative means "in addition to." Alternative means "instead of." All people, even those who speak, use different forms of AAC every day. These forms include gestures, pointing to objects, words and pictures in the environment, facial expression, body language, writing and drawing. They are used on their own "instead of" speech and "in addition to" speech.

When an individual has significant difficulties with communication in one or more environments, use of AAC tools and techniques becomes even more important. In addition to those "no technology" forms mentioned above, they might also use:

### Light technology AAC

- Communication books, boards and symbols
- Varying number of messages can be represented by objects, photos, line drawings, written words or letters



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*Courtesy of the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago, Revised September 2009 by DynaVox*

## High technology AAC

- Devices that require a charge and have voice output
- Varying number of messages can be represented by objects, photos, line drawings, written words or letters



## Techniques

Techniques for selecting messages (e.g., scanning, eye gaze) and increasing the rate of communication (e.g., prestored messages, abbreviation/expansion) are often used in conjunction with the light and high tech tools like those of us who speak use abbreviations and hand signals. In addition, communication partners use techniques both to assist augmented communicators in learning their communication method but also to increase success of communication as we would with speech (e.g., modeling the use of the communication method ourselves, asking clarifying questions, providing opportunities for practice, prompting).

## Who can use AAC?

Based on our initial definition of AAC as something all of us use in our day-to-day lives, we know that AAC is something that can be used by every person in every environment—home, work, school, community. AAC is of benefit regardless of age, communication or cognitive ability level. It provides a means of expressing wants, needs, and ideas decreasing frustration and isolation. Having a way to communicate can help build communication and language skills, increase interaction with family and friends and participation in school, community events and work.

When an individual has difficulty successfully communicating in one or more environments, some form of AAC (no tech, light tech or high tech) should be provided to meet their needs. The specific AAC tools and techniques should be identified through an augmentative communication evaluation. Check with your speech-language pathologist or find a speech-language pathologist through [www.sllocator.com](http://www.sllocator.com).

### Questions to ask when considering AAC:

- Does the individual have difficulty expressing their wants, needs or thoughts in one or more environments?
- Do you or others need to have background knowledge or ask multiple questions to understand what that person is saying?
- Does the individual become frustrated or give up when attempting to communicate?
- Does the individual understand more than they are able to express?

If you answered "yes" to one or more of these questions, discuss AAC with a speech-language pathologist.