AAC BOOT CAMP (Infographic)
Top 10 AAC Implementation Tips
(Screen Reader Friendly Version)

<u>A</u>ugmentative and <u>A</u>lternative <u>C</u>ommunication

Language is about connecting with other people.
If you can focus on providing robust AAC and teaching language skills that allow AAC learners to connect with people in their lives, you will make a real difference!

1. Presume Potential

Presume that EVERY individual has the potential to learn, communicate, connect with others, develop literacy skills, and be a contributor to society. You can provide support and avoid doing harm by presuming potential, providing access to a robust AAC system and literacy instruction, and modeling AAC as much and as early as possible (although it's never too late)!
<u>Description includes language shared by Tabi Jones-Wohleber in Module 9 of MASTER PAL training</u>.

2. Model, Model, Model AAC!

Babies learn spoken language when they are immersed in their language and given *LOTS* of models and time to practice. People who use AAC learn language in the same way! We can model for AAC learners by speaking while simultaneously pointing to symbols and words on the AAC system. Modeling only a few key words of your spoken sentence is just fine. Once you are more comfortable modeling AAC, you can model utterances that are 1 to 2 words longer than the AAC user typically says.

It is important to note the difference between prompting and modeling. Prompting is "the act of trying to get someone to say something" (Cambridge Dictionary) while modeling means "to use as an example to follow or imitate" (Oxford Languages). Modeling AAC allows us to teach the meaning of symbols and support language development without requiring a specific response that may or may not reflect the communicator's thoughts.

3. Use Caution When Prompting

We like to help and tend to find silence uncomfortable. Though being helpful is great, too much help can cause dependence and send the wrong message. It's best to be mindful of how and how often you are prompting a learner to communicate. Try to avoid the temptation of telling them what to say. Whenever possible, avoid hand-over-hand prompting because it may unintentionally encourage prompt dependent behaviors (such as grabbing for *your* hand to use *their* AAC system). If you are unsure about how to provide the right amount of support, you may find it helpful to use an AAC prompt hierarchy.

4. Interact (Instead of Testing)

People who have complex communication needs and complex bodies often have limited control over many aspects of their lives. When we teach language in a way that makes communication feel like work, a test, or a demand, language learners may shut down or exercise control by <u>not</u> communicating. Ask yourself often, "Am I modeling language and focusing on interaction or just testing?" Make it fun!

TIP: Using sentence starters like "Maybe" and "I wonder" can be super helpful. For example, you might say, "You're banging on the table and screaming. I wonder if you're feeling **mad**" (while making an angry face and modeling **mad** on the AAC system). With these starters, you are neither assuming you know what they are thinking nor demanding a response. You are instead attributing meaning to the communicative behaviors you are seeing and providing models of words they might use.

5. Provide Robust Core-Based Vocabulary (From the Start)

Robust AAC systems have the following features:

- A consistent motor plan
- Expandable vocabulary allowing the system to grow as skills improve
- Grammar support
- Available core words in large numbers including all parts of speech
- Pre-programmed whole messages for fast moving social occasions and emergency situations
- Capacity to add fringe (personally relevant) vocabulary and images
- Available alphabet (keyboard) with letter/word/phrase prediction and spelling correction (because it is SO important that we teach literacy to ALL learners!)
  <u>Based on Kate Ahern's list in Teaching Learners with Multiple Special Needs - What is Robust Vocabulary in AAC</u>

6. Pause… For Longer Than It Feels comfortable

Many people who use AAC require a lot of time to process what is said to them, figure out what they need to say, and generate their message using their AAC system. Though it is natural to want to help when we don't get an immediate response...RESIST! Count in your head and wait at least 10 to 15 seconds before jumping in again. While waiting, look at the communicator with an "expectant" look to show that you believe they can respond, value what they have to say, and are willing to wait!

7. Teach All Language Functions (Not Just Requesting!)

To be able to communicate our wants and needs, gain and share information, establish and maintain a connection with others, and ensure our personal safety, we need the vocabulary and skills to convey ALL language functions. AAC learners need to be taught to do more than just request; they also need to comment, describe, ask questions, complain, argue, self-advocate, and much more!

8. Personalize AAC Systems

When we have a tool that we use daily, including an AAC system, it is important that we customize that tool to ensure a perfect "fit". AAC customizations should include things like vocabulary, color scheme and settings (including support for vision and hearing needs), symbols and photos, language organization, voice, access method and accessories (to accommodate motor and positioning needs). We should modify AAC systems to ensure access to a robust core vocabulary that is balanced with fringe words, pre-programmed phrases and sentences, and a keyboard. Adding and modeling highly motivating vocabulary (such as words to talk about favorite people, places, things, activities, and lived experiences) is a great way to get someone excited about communicating!

Note: Individuals who use AAC should be included in discussions and decisions about customizing their systems.

9. Teach Grammar

Our messages are communicated more clearly with correct or approximated grammar. Additionally, some communication partners may underestimate the ability of a person who uses AAC based upon the sophistication of their grammar. We can be sure that if we do not model and teach grammar (such as conjugating verbs and adding plurals), AAC users will not have the opportunity to learn those language forms. Presume potential, teach, and model it all!

10. Give Language Learning Time!

We allow typically developing children years to develop their language; however, we have a tendency to expect that those learning AAC will know how to use language as soon as an AAC system is in place. When we consider how language is learned and that those with complex communication needs often learn and process information at a slower pace, we should be providing them with MORE time and support to learn language, not less!

Bonus Tip: Guide AAC Intervention with Data Collection!

Using data allows us to use evidence to monitor progress, indicate skill mastery, identify areas of need, and identify next steps. If the AAC learner is using a high-tech system, check to see if their system offers data tracking/logging!

But What About MY Student Who is in the Earliest, Most Pre-intentional Stages?

While the above tips represent current best practices in the field, there will always be some communicators who need some "out of the box" thinking when it comes to getting them started with AAC. You may need to take a step back and start simply by determining what the earliest communicators enjoy and then move forward from there.

COMMON AAC "OOPS"

We are not born knowing how to teach AAC. Sometimes our instincts are not quite right. That's ok!

It's Best to Avoid...

- Assuming you can know what another person is thinking or wants to say
- Taking away the AAC system
- Expecting or demanding a response every time you model language or ask a question
- Assuming AAC users with some natural speech can access that speech in every situation
- Viewing an AAC user's response as a form of compliance (Communication is NOT compliance.)
- Asking only yes/no questions
- Saying "Use your words" (If they knew the words or could use them right now, they would!)
- Starting with too little vocabulary (You cannot model, teach, or learn vocabulary that is not available in the AAC system.)
- Assuming that if they are not yet using the AAC system, it means they cannot or never will
- Prompting too much and too soon
- Trying to teach language using boring activities (We're motivated to learn and communicate when we are engaged and having fun!)
- Doing all the talking

Lauren Enders, M.A., CCC-SLP
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