



Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) Screening

People may have communication needs due to developmental disabilities, such as cerebral palsy, or they may acquire communication disabilities as a result of stroke or other conditions.

Communication disabilities may be “receptive,” related to understanding what is said. Hearing problems should be ruled out first, for people who seem to have trouble understanding. Conditions like aphasia, a language impairment resulting from stroke or brain injury, may affect the ability to understand. Some people with autism are more successful when information is presented visually rather than through the auditory channel and can understand others better when “visual supports” are employed.

Communication disabilities may be “expressive,” related to expressing one’s thoughts, needs and wants with others. People communicate in many different ways. While “speech” is what we typically think of when we think of communication, people with and without disabilities usually use a variety of strategies to get their message across. Some of these ways of communicating are clear to anyone, whether or not they have experience interacting with the person. Some of these ways are very individualized, and are usually understood only by those who know the person well. Some of these ways require the individual who is communicating with the person with a communication disability to have special training, e.g., American Sign Language.

All people with disabilities have the right to functional communication. Individuals should be able to:

- Communicate with and be understood by a variety of familiar and unfamiliar people (not just one or two people who are used to the way the person communicates);
- communicate about many different topics (not just basic needs); and
- communicate for a variety of purposes (not just to “ask” people for what they need).

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) means all forms of communication that enhance or supplement speech (and writing). These forms sometimes replace “natural” speech production altogether. Different forms of AAC involve using unaided approaches like manual gestures or signs, or aided approaches like communication boards, computers or other devices to communicate. Aided AAC includes both devices themselves as well as the services necessary to customize, maintain, and maximize the use of the device.

AAC ASSISTIVE DEVICES THAT MAY BE NEEDED

1. Low-tech communication aids such as picture or letter communication boards that do not have any speech output.
2. Low-cost communication aids such as “talking photo albums” or “talking photo frames.” These are usually generic items that have been adapted to serve as a communication device. A speech language pathologist (SLP) may have been involved with customizing the device.

3. “Generic” items that are of moderate cost like tablets and smartphones with special “apps” for communication.
4. Specialized augmentative communication devices (also known as “speech generating devices” or SGDs) that use recorded speech. A speech language pathologist should be involved in the selection and customization of the device, including the selection of vocabulary and the location of the messages, as well as training the consumer and staff who support the consumer.
5. Complex SGDs that use synthesized speech. A speech language pathologist should be involved in the selection and customization of the device, including training the consumer and staff who support the consumer.
6. Consumers who use augmentative communication devices/speech generating devices may require specialized wheelchair mounting for their device and other assistive technology to access their device (e.g., switches). Accordingly, an occupational or physical therapist should be involved in the selection of augmentative communication devices/speech generating devices for people with significant physical disabilities.
7. Consumers who use communication devices that “talk” (whether low cost aids or more complex augmentative communication devices/speech generating devices) may also benefit from a speaker phone for successful telecommunications.

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