

All About AAC: Online Panel Discussion

February 26, 2022

PLEASE NOTE: The information provided in this presentation represents the knowledge and opinions of the presenters, not necessarily that of POAC-NoVa. POAC is committed to the use of evidence-based practices, but we also want to give you information from a variety of educated perspectives. Please use this information as the beginning of your exploration of what will work best for your child.

Introducing Today's Panelists:

- **Lindsay and Toby Latham**

Parent Advocates

- **Amanda Mills**

Parent, Special Education Teacher, and POAC Board Member

- **Elizabeth Zielinski**

Parent, Special Education Advocate, and Vice Chair of Fairfax County Advisory Committee for Students with Disabilities

Background of AAC

What is AAC?

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) encompasses all of the ways people have of communicating **other** than using speech.

- Augmentative: Added to a person's speech
- Alternative: Used instead of speech

All of the tools accessed by an AAC user are collectively known as their AAC System.

Types of AAC

- **Aided vs. Unaided**

Aided systems involve using external tools or assistance; such as devices or interpreters.

Unaided systems have no equipment, such as sign language, gestures, expressions, writing, etc.

- **Low-Tech vs. High-Tech**

Low-tech examples: Picture Exchange System (PECs), alphabet boards.

High-tech examples: iPads, speech-generating devices, keyboards.

Top Ten Myths About AAC

Myth #1: Only people who don't use spoken language benefit from using AAC.

TRUTH:

AAC can enhance communication for people with language delays.

Myth #2: People who can't speak are incapable of complex thought and language.

TRUTH:

The IQ test does not exist that fully accommodates co-existing speech and motor planning disabilities. IQ data should not be used as the sole measure of intelligence in students with these disabilities.

Myth #3: Using AAC will prevent a child from developing or using speech.

TRUTH:

Research has shown that AAC use helps students make gains in expressive language, reduces frustration, and teaches the benefits of communication.

Myth #4: Student is “low functioning” so offering AAC isn’t appropriate.

TRUTH:

The terms “high functioning” and “low functioning” are not a diagnosis. They are jargon, formerly used to identify students who could speak and those who couldn’t.

Myth #5: A child is too young, or has too many physical and cognitive limitations, to use AAC.

TRUTH:

Children with physical, motor, or learning difficulties benefit from early intervention. AAC should be introduced as early as possible.

Myth #6: We tried [product] and it didn't work, so this student is not a candidate for AAC.

TRUTH:

Learning to communicate effectively with any form of AAC is a long process that requires commitment and qualified support.

Myth #7: The student isn't using the device to communicate, they are just playing with it.

TRUTH:

When a person is exploring their device, they are exploring language. It is a natural step in development.

Myth #8: We only have _____ (LAMP, ProLoQuo, etc) in our school, so the student has to use that.

TRUTH:

Every human being, regardless of disability, uses multimodal communication techniques.

Individualization is your right.

Myth #9: High tech AAC is better than
low tech AAC.

TRUTH:

It depends on the student's unique needs and
preferences.

Myth #10: The form of AAC your student uses is not an evidence-based practice.

TRUTH:

“Evidence based practice” draws on three sources: quality research, practitioner expertise, and client preference.

Credit: American Speech-Language Hearing Association

Remember:

- AAC is not just a voice output device. It is so much more!
- Communication is multimodal, so is AAC. The same person may benefit from using different tools depending on their needs or the setting.

A Journey To Early Intervention

- Early speech language services lead to AAC
- AAC use was modeled and taught
- Progression through different types of AAC

IEPs and the Classroom

New to AAC?

- What are the reasons you think your child would benefit from AAC?
- Ask for an Assistive Technology Evaluation (ATS FCPS, AsTech APS, AT PWCS)
 - Request written results: What did they use/try?
 - Check results for myths and missing pieces.
- Document the discussion to be included in Present Levels of IEP.
- Agree on a method, to trail a method or to explore more options.
- Once a method is determined it should be listed as an accommodation.

In Your AAC Advocacy Toolbox

- Title II, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)
 - Ensure effective communication supports and services
 - Honor the individual's choice
 - Public entities' obligations (and exceptions)
- Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA)
 - AAC covered under Supplementary Aids and Services
 - Must be considered case-by-case, individualized to needs
 - Testing and evaluations must be:
 - Administered in the child's ... mode of communication
 - In the form most likely to yield accurate information (strength-informed)
- Case Law
 - *K.M. ex rel. Bright v. Tustin Unified Sch. Dist.*, 725 F.3d 1088 (9th Cir. 2013)

Federal Guidance

- **DOE/DOJ FAQ on Effective Communication for Students with Hearing, Vision or Speech Disabilities in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools**
(November, 2014)
 - Confirms that public schools must comply with both IDEA and ADA
 - ADA applies to everyone, regardless of having an IEP or 504
 - Restates that schools must give “primary consideration” to the request of the student when selecting an aid or service
 - AAC must be accessible, timely, and protect privacy and independence
 - Rules cover “anyone who seeks to participate,” not just students.

Before the IEP

- **Mindset Focus**

- Communication is a human right; a civil right; and an educational right.
- People with communication disabilities have historically been denied access to meaningful, autonomous lives.
- It's not adversarial to know and claim your rights.

- **Verbiage to Remember and Use**

- Consider saying “nonspeaking” instead of “nonverbal”
- “Individualized” and “Unique Needs”
- “Appropriate” vs. “Best”
- Meaningful Participation and Informed Consent

During the IEP

Needs → Goals → Related Services → Supplementary Aids → Accommodations

- Needs: PLOP or PLAAFP - aka “Present Levels”
 - What specifically necessitates the supports you want to request?
 - Anything in Present Levels must be addressed elsewhere in the IEP, or with a discussion of why the team deferred action.
 - Can add information as “Parent Input”
- Goals: Skill development, pragmatic language, expressive communication
- Related Services: Speech, OT, AT
- Supplementary Aids: Products and methods
- Accommodations: Environmental supports
- Afterwards: The Power of the PWN (Prior Written Notice)

During the IEP

→ Be detailed and precise

“My child communicates by pointing with his right index finger to an 8.5 x 11-inch laminated, high-contrast alphabet board held on his right side, vertically, X inches from his chest, held at a height so that the middle of the board aligns with his right elbow when positioned at a 90 degree angle.... ”

→ Requesting specific products or methodology

- ◆ If you are already using AAC: refer to DOJ/DOE FAQ for “primary consideration” language
- ◆ If you are not already using AAC: Schools may deny a request to start with a specific product. Use a level of detail about needs that will direct the team toward the method/product you want; but be open to alternatives that may also meet the needs. (Why?)

Sample Accommodations to Consider

General:

- Trusted and trained support person
- Training for backup personnel
- Reduced homework
- Additional time to complete assignments
- Flexible school day
- Read-aloud
- Large font, captioned materials
- Preferred seating: near door, near front
- Alternative seating: yoga ball, cushion
- Daily home-school communication log

Testing:

- Trained support person, scribe
- Extended time
- Extended days
- Quiet room
- Non-fluorescent lighting, large table
- Seating
- Paper-based
- Read-aloud
- Access to fidgets

About Evidence-Based Practice

- “Evidence-Based” vs. “Empirically Validated”
- Neither the ADA nor IDEA requires that a student’s method of communication be evidence-based.
 - IEP services must be “based on peer-reviewed research to the extent practicable.”
 - “Most” evidence-based?
- Quality peer-reviewed research can still be used in the wrong context.
 - Ex. A study that demonstrates the effectiveness of ASL shouldn’t be applied to a student with a motor planning disability.
- Ask:
 - Did the study include test subjects with the same characteristics as your child?
 - Are the outcome measures meaningful to your child? Ex. Research on PECs doesn’t benefit a student in general education.
- Appropriate research is a valuable tool. But a lack of research is not the end.

Additional Resources

- **Center on Technology and Disability** *(legacy website)*
 - Project funded by the U.S. Department of Education, concluded in 2019.

- **CommunicationFIRST**
 - National nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting and advancing the civil rights of children and adults in the United States who cannot rely on speech alone to be heard and understood.

- **Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates (COPAA)**
 - National nonprofit organization that serves to protect and enforce the legal and civil rights of students with disabilities and their families; by securing high quality educational services and promoting excellence in advocacy.

Dangers of Denied Access

- Transitioned to Kindergarten with significant AAC skills
- Placed in seclusion and denied AAC
- Regression and recoupment

Advocacy and the Law

State-level Advocacy

House Bill No. 1047

A BILL to amend the Code of Virginia by adding a section numbered 22.1-217.3, relating to students who need or use augmentative and alternative communication; instruction; eligibility; staff training.

Be it enacted by the General Assembly of Virginia: That the Code of Virginia is amended by adding a section numbered 22.1-217.3 as follows:

§ 22.1-217.3. Students who need or use augmentative and alternative communication; instruction; eligibility; staff training.

State-level Advocacy

House Bill No. 1047 (cont.)

Opposition talking points:

- Unfunded mandate.
- Requires school divisions to decide whether to comply with state or federal special education law.
- Requires school divisions to honor AAC systems that are not evidence-based.
- Restricts school divisions from using IQ test results for other purposes.
- Restricts schools from taking into consideration AAC support needs in determining where instruction is provided (i.e., creates conflict with LRE requirements).
- Addresses issues that can be resolved through the IEP process (i.e., parents just don't know what they're doing and need more training).

State-level Advocacy

House Bill No. 1047 (cont.)

A. As used in this section, "augmentative and alternative communication" or "AAC" means any device, tool, support, or service, or any combination thereof, that facilitates any form of communication, other than oral speech, that can be used to express thoughts, needs, wants, and ideas.

State-level Advocacy

House Bill No. 1047 (cont.)

B. In accordance with the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1400 et seq.:

State-level Advocacy

House Bill No. 1047 (cont.)

B. 3. Each school division shall document, on the individualized education program of a student with a disability who needs or uses AAC, the student's AAC and communication access and support needs, including, as appropriate, individualized training as an assistive technology service for each school division employee or contractor who provides instruction or direct support to such student, to support the student's use of AAC and to ensure that curricula and instruction are designed or adapted as necessary to accommodate the student's unique communication access needs. Each school division shall ensure that its employees and contractors **complete such training before the start of the regular school year or extended school year period.** Employees or contractors hired after the start of the school year or extended school year period shall complete such training **as soon as possible, provided that another trained employee or contractor supports the student's use of AAC in the interim.**

House Bill No. 1047 (cont.)

House Bill No. 1047 (cont.)

B. 1. No student who needs or uses AAC to communicate shall be denied the opportunity for inclusion in regular classrooms or the provision of age-appropriate instruction **solely** on the basis that the student may require support with AAC;

State-level Advocacy

House Bill No. 1047 (cont.)

B. 2. No individualized education program team, member of such team, or school division employee shall utilize the results of any **test designed to provide a single general intelligence quotient or any other measure of intelligence or cognitive ability** in assessing whether a student with a disability is **eligible to be provided with and use AAC** at school[.]

State-level Advocacy

House Bill No. 1047 (cont.)

Subcommittee recommendation.

Opposition input regarding subcommittee recommendation.

Decision to strike the bill from the agenda (i.e., kill the bill).

Advocacy Next Steps

Local level policy.

Meeting with opposition organizations to clarify intent and meaning.

Launching website to explain the issue and describe the proposed solution.

Educating elected officials.

Re-introducing the bill at a future session.

Tackling bigger issues.

Notes and References

Slide 7: Alternative to consider: Raven's Progressive Matrices; Embedded Figures Test

The Level and Nature of Autistic Intelligence: Dawson, M., Soulières, I., Gernsbacher, M.A., & Mottron, L. (2007). *Psychological Science*, 18:8, 657–662.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4287210/>

A New Step Towards Understanding Embedded Figures Test Performance in the Autism Spectrum: Almeida RA, Dickinson JE, Maybery MT, Badcock JC, Badcock DR (2010). *Neuropsychologia*. 2010 Jan; 48(2):374-81.

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/19786040/>

Slide 15: <https://www.asha.org/CE/for-providers/Evidence-Based-Practice-CE-Providers/>

Slide 20: <http://cdn.ca9.uscourts.gov/datastore/opinions/2013/08/07/11-56259%20web%20revised.pdf>
<https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/crt/legacy/2012/01/27/kmtustinbr.pdf>

Slide 21: <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/dcl-fags-effective-communication-201411.pdf>

Slide 23: Exercise: Describe your child's autism without calling it autism. Ex. Apraxia, sensory impairment, anxiety, ADHD, ocular motor impairment, etc.

Notes and References (continued)

Slide 26: The Role of Augmentative and Alternative Communication for Children with Autism: Current Status and Future Trends: Iacono, T., Trembath, D., & Erickson, S. (2016). *Neuropsychiatric Disease and Treatment*, 12: 2349–2361.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5036660/>

Analyzes 17 systematic reviews of the AAC literature and finds very little high quality research on the efficacy of AAC for the autistic population exists.

Autistic Children at Risk of Being Underestimated: school-based pilot study of a strength-informed assessment: Courchesne, V., Meilleur, A.-A.S., Poulin-Lord, M.-P., Dawson, M., & Soulières, I. (2015). *Molecular Autism*, 6:12.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4359559/>

Establishes that conventional measures of intelligence are inappropriate for non-speaking autistics, and may lead to them being underestimated.

Minimally Verbal School-Aged Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: The Neglected End of the Spectrum: Tager-Flusberg, H., & Kasari, C. (2013). *Autism Research: Official Journal of the International Society for Autism Research*, 6:6.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3869868/>

Finds that even though about 30% of children with autism spectrum disorder are minimally verbal, almost all autism research focuses on verbal children, and therefore most autism research cannot be assumed to be relevant to the minimally verbal.

The Level and Nature of Autistic Intelligence: Dawson, M., Soulières, I., Gernsbacher, M.A., & Mottron, L. (2007). *Psychological Science*, 18:8, 657–662.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4287210/>

Empirically tested assumptions about autistic intelligence using both the Wechsler scales of intelligence and Raven's Progressive Matrices, concluding that "intelligence has been underestimated in autistics."

Notes and References (continued)

Slide 27:

<https://www.ctdinstitute.org/library> - Page states it would remain available through 2021. Still active as of February 2022.

<https://communicationfirst.org/>

<https://www.copaa.org/>

Thank You for Attending Today's Session!

If you want to contact the panelists with more questions:

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