COMMUNICATION MATTERS

A NEWSLETTER FOR PARENTS, TEACHERS, EARLY LEARNING PROVIDERS AND CAREGIVERS OF PRESCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN.

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)

What is AAC?

"Augmentative and alternative communication" or "AAC." The term sounds a little intimidating, but all it really means is all the ways we communicate with each other besides talking. We all use AAC when we make facial expressions or gestures to express our thoughts and ideas. We use AAC when we point to a picture in a restaurant menu, stop at a stop sign, or go into the right public washroom because we recognize the symbols for MAN and WOMAN. We use AAC when we write a note or send an e-mail. AAC is everywhere in our daily lives.

AAC methods can be unaided (relying on the person's body alone) or aided (requiring the use of some kind of tools or equipment). Methods include:

- facial expressions and eye gaze
- gestures (e.g. pointing, waving)
- sign languages (e.g. American Sign Language)
- educational sign codes (e.g. Signed English)

- pictures (e.g. photographs and line drawings)
- picture symbols (e.g. Picture Communication Symbols, used in the popular Boardmaker program, or universally recognized symbols like the skull and crossbones indicating poison)
- print (e.g. handwriting and computer-generated print).

Who uses AAC?

We all do. But for some people, AAC methods are particularly important. Some people rely on AAC methods to help them understand spoken language, and/or because their speech is limited or really hard for others to understand. Communication may be affected by medical conditions or other factors, including:

- Cerebral Palsy
- Hearing loss
- Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Developmental language delay
- Overall developmental delay
- Traumatic brain injury
- Progressive neurological disorder
- Stroke

- Some genetic disorders
- Apraxia, dyspraxia (difficulty coordinating the muscles of speech)
- Temporary medical conditions such as a tracheotomy

This is not an exhaustive list! Many people benefit from the use of AAC methods, for a variety of reasons.

How is AAC used?

How an AAC system is used depends on the user and the communication environment. AAC may be as simple as an eye blink that means yes. It may be as complicated as a multi-level electronic device that allows the user to generate complex sentences and produce them in a synthesized voice. However the user accesses the system, the listener needs to take an active part in making sure that communication is successful.

What is AAC used for?

As with spoken language, AAC methods can be used to communicate many different things. The same communication act might mean several different things, depending on the context in which it occurs. Here are some examples that young children might use:

- **Greeting:** Waving "hi" to a friend.

- **Understanding and following a routine:** Looking at pictures to remember what to do next when brushing your teeth; looking at a FIRST-THEN board to remember what good thing will happen after you finish the thing you don't want to do; following a visual schedule to get through the routine of your day.

- **Asking for something you want:** Signing apple to get an adult to give you an apple

- **Naming a thing:** Signing apple because an adult asked you "What is that?"

- **Making a comment:** Signing apple because you noticed one on the counter and thought that was interesting.

- **Rejecting:** Pushing an apple away because you don't want it.

- **Clarifying:** Pointing to a picture of apple because mom gave you a banana and you really wanted an apple.

- **Requesting information:** Pointing to a picture of apple because mom has a bag of groceries, and you wonder if she bought apples.

- **Being funny:** Pressing a button on your high-tech communication device to make it say "apple" when dad asks what you want to play with.

Again, this is a very incomplete list of examples. AAC methods can be used to express a wide range of language purposes, just as spoken language can.

Confusing Acronyms!

People sometimes use the terms "pecs" or "pics" to refer to the pictures that a child or adult uses to understand and communicate with the important people is his or her life. This is incorrect but understandable.

PCS (often pronounced "pics") stands for Picture Communication Symbols.
PCS is a set of colour and black & white drawings originally developed by Mayer-Johnson, LLC specifically for AAC use. The symbols are easy to learn because they have a high degree of iconicity – a fancy way of saying they often look like the thing or concept they represent. Here are some examples:
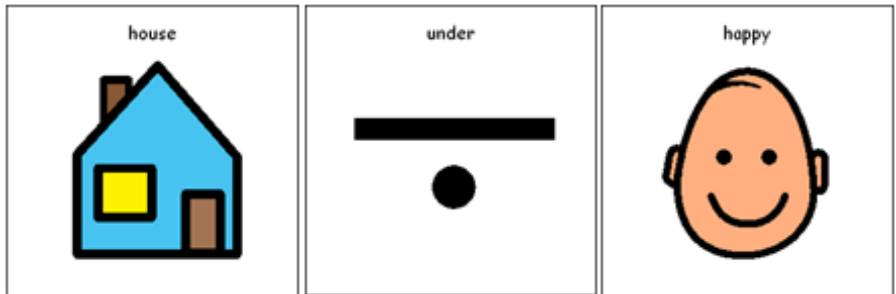
Learning PCS is made even easier for family members communicating with the AAC user, since the printed word is presented above the symbol. Mayer- Johnson developed the popular Boardmaker software for easy use of the PC symbols. More information is available at their website, www.mayer-johnson.ca.

PC symbols are not the only type of pictures available to AAC users. Communication displays, whether made of laminated cardboard or appearing on the screen of increasingly sophisticated hi-tech devices, can use a variety of different types of symbols, logos, photographs, line drawings, printed words – whatever carries the most meaning for that individual user.

PECS stands for Picture Exchange Communication System. PECS was developed in 1985. It was initially used as a way of teaching preschoolers who, because of autism or other social communication difficulties, did not use speech in socially acceptable or functional ways. Some of these children could talk, but spoke only when prompted to, or couldn't use their speech meaningfully. The PECS method was developed to help children learn to start conversations, with an ultimate goal of increased spontaneous speech.

In the initial phase of PECS users learn to exchange an actual thing (usually a picture, often a PC symbol) for another actual thing (the item they want) in the same way that someone with spoken language abilities would exchange a spoken word for a desired item. Later phases of this highly structured teaching method help users learn to use longer sentences, often spoken, to make comments as well as requests.

In the years since its inception, PECS use has expanded to include children and adults who have difficulties interacting with others or getting a message across clearly for reasons other than autism.

More information about PECS is available at www.pecs-canada.com, the internet home of Pyramid Educational Consultants.

What else should I know about AAC?

Here are a few things to keep in mind about living and communicating with an AAC user:

- You can talk without being communicative. You can communicate without talking.

- An AAC system is never "done." A spoken vocabulary changes over time; so does a visual one. Whether the system is gestural, low-tech or hi-tech, don't limit the user by limiting the size and complexity of the system as language skills develop.

- Let everybody in a group know how to use the system. Treat it as a language that you want the user to know is a respected way of communicating.

- It's sometimes tempting to use AAC only to tell the user what to do. FIRST-THEN boards and visual schedules are helpful, but they don't give the user any power. Think of AAC as the user's voice to express wants and needs, not just as a tool to tell him or her what to do.

- Individualize. Think of the personality, likes, dislikes, visual skills, cognitive skills, language skills, mobility and motivation of the user as you determine AAC vocabulary. Think of any special needs the audience might have (for example, a child whose grandparent has reduced vision may need to use large photos). As much as possible, involve the user in the selection and design of the AAC system.

- Have patience, with the user and with yourself. It may take more time to communicate using AAC than spoken language. Give the user your attention, your eye contact, and your encouragement. Have fun!

We are going GREEN!

Our "Communication Matters" newsletter will no longer be mailed out in the spring and fall.
**To access it go to https://hnhu.org/newsletters/communication-matters/**
There you can sign up to receive notifications of the release of the new issues . Feel free to pick up a copy while you are here is you would like.

Our services are fun, free and accessible.

No child is too young to be seen. With parent consent, anyone can refer.

Children starting Junior Kindergarten in the fall must be referred by the end of June in the year they will start JK in order to access assessment and treatment services. As of July 1st, JK children can be referred to school-based speech and language services by speaking to the School Principal.

If you wish to refer to the Haldimand Norfolk Preschool Speech and Language Program, call the Ontario Early Years Centre today at 1-866-463-2759, or access our online form.
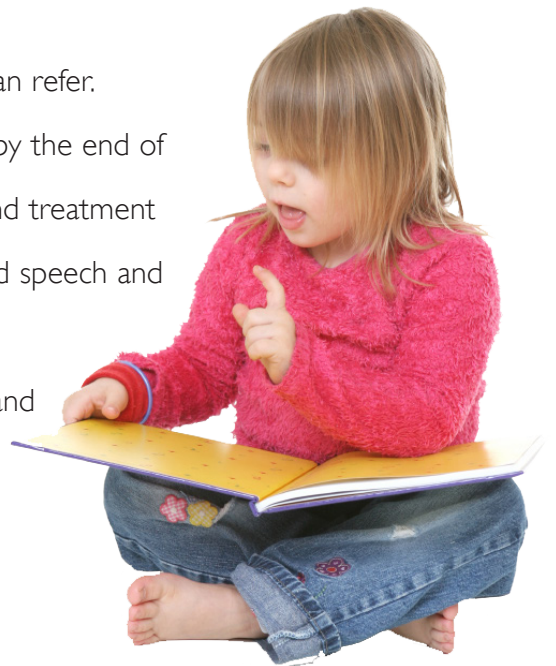
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