

Communication Is a Right: Making AAC Part of Everyday Educational Practice

From specialist equipment to a culture of participation

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EXECUTIVE ABSTRACT

AAC is too often treated as a specialist device used in scheduled sessions. Communication access must travel across lessons, care, play, transitions, family life and decision-making. This paper explains why implementation depends on opportunity, partner competence and institutional culture as much as technology.

Communication exceeds speech

Augmentative and Alternative Communication includes tools and strategies that supplement speech or provide another route to communication. It may involve gesture, signs, symbols, books, switches, eye gaze or voice-output technology. The relevant question is not whether a person speaks, but whether they can express meaning and be understood.

Educational participation depends on more than answering curriculum questions. Learners need to request, refuse, comment, joke, ask for help, report discomfort and influence what happens to them. A system limited to adult-selected choices can manage behaviour while failing to support genuine communication.

Access must be continuous

An AAC system locked away, uncharged, out of reach or used only with one professional is not reliable access. The system should be available across environments and supported during fatigue, distress, movement and unfamiliar activity. Vocabulary must reflect the learner's real life, identity and changing interests.

Continuity requires coordination between home, school and clinical professionals. Families need respectful training and opportunities to shape vocabulary. Staff changes should not remove access; communication knowledge must be recorded and shared safely.

Partners carry responsibility

Communication success is often attributed to the learner, yet partners control pace, opportunity and response. Adults may ask rapid questions, prompt excessively, anticipate needs or abandon the interaction before the learner can respond. These habits teach that communication is unnecessary or ineffective.

Partner training should include waiting, modelling without demanding imitation, recognising multimodal communication, confirming interpretation and responding to refusal. Leaders must protect time for practice and coaching; a one-off awareness session cannot change interaction culture.

Presume agency and protect consent

AAC is central to safeguarding and supported decision-making. Learners need accessible ways to say no, identify people, describe events and communicate pain. Systems should include language for consent and personal boundaries without restricting vocabulary because adults find topics uncomfortable.

Practitioners must avoid using communication systems primarily to secure compliance. A learner's refusal may require exploration, not automatic override. Presuming competence does not mean ignoring support needs; it means refusing to treat difficulty expressing knowledge as proof that knowledge is absent.

An organisational communication standard

Schools should establish an audit covering availability, maintenance, vocabulary relevance, staff competence, use across settings, family partnership and learner influence. Communication goals should appear across the curriculum and in safeguarding, behaviour and personal-care planning.

The cultural shift is simple to state but demanding to deliver: communication is not a therapy task added to education. It is the means through which education, relationships, safety and self-determination become possible.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

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AUTHOR NOTE

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