

Using AAC to model language

We all begin to learn language through language models (language examples) from others in our environment. From a very young age children are exposed to years of language models around them before they begin to understand and then use this language themselves. This is something that we are all familiar with. These same principles also apply to a child or young person (CYP) who is using a different communication system. They also require lots of modelling before they can begin to fully understand and use their system themselves. This is where you the communication partner comes in.



Bombard the child or young person with language models (using their communication system)

Children learning to use AAC need lots of modelling before they can be expected to produce similar messages. This process is backed up by evidence. There are lots of different AAC (Augmentative & Alternative Communication) systems that exist from Makaton sign, to chat mats, to core vocabulary boards, to computer programmes.

How to do model using an AAC system

Prepare

Using an AAC system to model is a tricky skill. At first you will not know where to find the vocabulary. Practise makes perfect..

Model

Use the system yourself alongside your spoken language. You don't need to have the child saying it at the same time when it's your turn to speak. Use key words and short phrases. For example:

'Now it's time (point to symbol- time) to tidy (point to symbol- tidy) up'

Expand

Expand on what they've said by adding 1 more word

If child says: 'Push-ball,' Adult could model: 'Mum-push-ball'

Take your time and allow mistakes

It's okay to make mistake or get stuck yourself. Show them how you fix it and remember to say what you are doing out loud

Adult: 'oh no I'm on the wrong page' 'its okay, I can turn the pages to find the food'

Adult: 'Hmm I'm not sure what I can find it' 'let me look' 'here it is'

Teach operational skills

Teach them how to navigate the system e.g. turn pages, point to parts, turn on.

Think about prompts

We want to fade the level of support we provide when teaching the child a new skill (e.g. using peoples name in a sentence 'mum give ball'). We should fade the level of prompts we



provide when teaching a new skill so that the child becomes more independent. Consider prompting hierarchy for guidance. This doesn't mean that we stop modelling.

Focus on common verbs, pronouns and attributes (rather than nouns)

Focus on modelling language using core vocabulary. Core vocabulary refers to words that make 80% of communication. It is made up mostly of:

- Pronouns (e.g. I, your, she, he)
- Common verbs (e.g. 'want' 'more' 'help' etc.)
- Attributes (e.g. big, small).

It is better than using nouns (objects, people and places) as it can be used much more flexibly and in a wider range of contexts. See example below:

Instead of topic specific vocabulary:

'Car', 'Lego' 'Ball' (any other object)

Use core vocabulary:

'More – This' or 'I – want (and point)'

How to support child to use their own AAC system

When we are supporting a child or young person use their communication system, we need to pitch the support we provide them at the right level. We don't want to give them the model or what they can say straight away, nor do we want it to be so difficult that they give up all together. See the different levels of prompting that exist. Work your way through the steps and think about what steps you may be missing?

Lowest Level of support	Non-verbal Prompts	***Pause***	Give them time
		Body Language	Shrug with body, look expectantly
		Gesture	Tap towards the AAC system to get them started
	Verbal Prompts (From Indirect to Direct)	Request a response	'You need to ask me' or 'Now what?'
		Partial verbal prompt	'You went to the.....'
		Direct Model	Show them and then wait for them to imitate
Physical Prompt	Partial physical prompt	Show part of what to do, see if they can do the rest	
	Full physical prompt	Provide full hand over hand assistance	
Highest Level of support			

Frequently asked questions

Who is responsible for modelling?

Everyone that is communicating with the child should be using the child's system alongside their own e.g. pointing to a communication board while speaking the words. This includes teachers, learning support assistants and family members.

Who should take the lead at first?

Adults should take the lead when it comes to using the communication system. Do not wait for the child to become interested in the system. Start off the conversation or activity using the system before the student is expected to use it. This is because the individual may not always be motivated to use it at first. If the child begins to take the lead, let them.

When should the child's system be available for modelling?

All the time, during every activity. It should always be accessible. It is their voice and so taking away the system is like taking away their voice.

What do I do if a child refuses or plays with their communication system?

Do even more modelling. The system needs to become their norm. If no one else is using the system they may not want to or it may feel like a novelty. You should focus on modelling even more to build their confidence with this and persist with teaching appropriate attention and listening rules with their system, as you would with any other behaviour.

What can I use the system for?

Use it flexibly. Think about the range of communication functions such as:

- To greet ('Hello mum')
- To request ('I want a banana')
- To ask for help ('help')
- To comment ('Funny,' 'Nice shoes')
- To say how we are feeling ('Sad')
- To agree/disagree ('Yes')
- To give instructions ('you give the blue Lego')
- To take turns ('My turn')

Is an AAC system going to stop a child or young person speaking?

We use AAC systems alongside spoken words. AAC systems support a child or young person to get their message across successfully when their message may be unclear or limited. It may be also helpful for the child to extend on what they are able to say without this support. When we use an AAC system we provide spoken language models and so using an AAC system is facilitative and does not prevent speech development.

What can I try if the AAC system is not working?

Think about whether the AAC system could be adapted to support the child to use it. Is there a different way that the AAC system can be presented (upright to support attention)? Are there too many words on the page? Are the symbols big enough? Does the child understand symbols or do they need photos instead? Is the AAC system being presented within situations that the child finds motivating? Is its use meaningful for the child?

How long do I try a new AAC system for?

Put all effort into modelling consistently for a substantial amount of time (more than a few weeks) before a new one is considered. Think about whether everyone in the environment is also talking using the AAC system. If this is not the case then it is possible that the child has not been provided with enough models or enough time to get use to the system.