
Building Peer Relationships for Beginning Communicators in Inclusive Primary Settings

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Foreword

Though all children have a right to attend a local public school, those with communication challenges and their families face much more of a challenge. First, they must find a school that will *accept* them. A concept that is rarely considered by parents of children without disabilities. Next are the ongoing challenges for all involved to ensure targeted learning, participation and inclusion. The reward for this work is significant for all. The student with communication challenges and their family are given opportunities to learn, build friendships and participate in school life as anyone would expect. Classmates, teachers and the whole school community also learn about diversity, perseverance and alternate ways to achieve goals. Universal design means that an environment or activity can be accessed to the greatest extent by all participants. Sometimes just altering the way you do something can ensure that everyone participates. Same activity and the same goals, just a different way to get there.

To those of you navigating this path to inclusive and accessible society - *thankyou*. Of course, we need more resourcing, support and learning to make this thing work well, but the solution is not to give up. All of our efforts and stories of success are paving the way for better inclusion. We can learn from the challenges we face on the way, rather than see them as obstacles.

As an inclusive education teacher, one of your most valuable resources are peers. If you can teach and motivate them to interact with your student who has communication challenges, then you multiply your impact by the number of students in your class. Peer training strategies increase the number of models and opportunities that your student will experience to develop their communication. It will also increase the diversity of input in terms of vocabulary, interaction styles, opinions and personalities. The outcomes are a *two way street*. For the peers, adapting their interaction habits to include all students in the class is just another instance of the social skill learning that is critical in education. Peers are also learning not to fear difference but to ask questions in a respectful way so that they can understand.

Hannah Gutke has collated an excellent resource that provides the educator with starting points and ideas to support the peers of a student with communication challenges to understand and interact with their classmate. Inclusion should not be 'work' for the peers. It will come through understanding of each other and the skills needed to build relationships. Successful communication is paramount to this.

One day the word *inclusion* will not be necessary. We won't need a word for it as it will just be a thing. It's up to us as to how long this takes. Proactive resources like this one are a great catalyst to this end.

I encourage people to read this book, use the ideas, then adapt and personalise them to your setting. When you find something that works, share it with others.

The more we do together, the faster we'll get there.

Janelle Sampson

Director - Two Way Street

Creator of ROCC Assessment (Roadmap of Communicative Competence)

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Complex Communication Needs and AAC

A person can be described as having complex communication needs (CCN) if they are unable to use speech to meet all of their communication needs, given their age and culture (Porter & Kirkland, 2015).

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) refers to strategies, systems and tools that add to (augment) or supplement (as an alternative to) natural speech (AssistiveWare, 2018). People who benefit from AAC may have a range of communication needs. For some people, AAC may support their speech at times when levels of anxiety or stress is high, or they are communicating with less familiar partners, and it is difficult for speech to be used to effectively communicate messages. For others, AAC may be their primary method of communication and natural speech may not be possible or intelligible.

Unaided AAC is the term used to describe ways to augment or supplement speech without using any additional tools. Gesture, facial expression, and sign language are examples of *unaided* AAC. *Aided* AAC is used to describe both low tech and high tech supports such as picture symbols, communication books, communication apps, or speech-generating devices (AssistiveWare, 2018; Beukelman & Mirenda, 2005).

Beginning Communicators and Modelling

This resource aims to provide ideas and strategies to teachers and teams supporting students with CCN who are beginning to use AAC. It is aimed at supporting students who have a robust communication system in place, but who are still requiring significant modelling of their systems in order to develop competence as communicators with AAC.

Just like children with typical language development learn to speak through the modelling and expanding of language attempts, AAC users learn how to use their communication system through modelling. They need to see their systems used across a variety of contexts and for real communicative reasons (AssistiveWare, 2018). Just like learning to speak, learning to use AAC expressively can take significant time. The importance of everyone modelling continually and constantly for a child who is learning to use AAC is highlighted by Korsten (2011):

“The average 18-month-old child has been exposed to 4,380 hours of oral language at the rate of 8 hours/day from birth. A child who has a communication system and receives speech/language therapy two times per week for 20-30 minute sessions will reach this same amount of language exposure in 84 years.”

Modelling needs to be a key component of every interaction for students learning to use their AAC. It is recommended that a speech pathologist or other professional with expert knowledge in AAC be a part of a team supporting a beginning communicator. This person should be willing and able to provide expert advice and direction to additional resources to support effective modelling strategies.

Social Participation for AAC Users

The impact of peer connections, and modelling of AAC by the peers of beginning communicators is not to be underestimated. The social interactions, activities and routines occurring at school provide multiple opportunities for the establishment of friendships. Friendships have an impact on emotional, psychosocial and communication development, as well as academic performance (Anderson, Balandin & Clendon, 2011; Therrien, Light & Pope, 2016). They are essential to emotional well-being and educational progress (Hunt, Doering, Maier & Mintz, 2009).

For children with little to no functional speech who use AAC, social participation at school is often more limited than that of their peers (King & Fahsl, 2012; Ostvik, Ytterhus & Balandin, 2018; Raghavendra, Olson, Sampson, McInerney & Connell, 2012; Therrien, Light & Pope, 2016). Friendships can also be limited, and literature suggests that students with CCN are often lonely, experience reduced participation, and are at risk of experiencing substantial barriers to establishing friendships (Beukelman & Mirenda, 2005; Ostvik, Ytterhus & Balandin, 2018; Raghavendra, et al, 2012). Strong links between communication development and friendship development are evident. It is clear that consideration must be given to helping beginning communicators to develop connections with their peers.

“Wide-reaching societal impact” (Kent-Walsh & Light, 2003, p. 119) was used to describe the potential benefit of increased inclusion of students with a range of disabilities in general education programs, including those who have CCN. Despite practice shifts to include children with disability in inclusive settings, and development of relationships being central to the goals of many inclusive education programs, barriers to social inclusion for students with CCN still exist (Anderson, Balandin, & Clendon, 2011; Biggs, Carter, Gustafson, 2017; Carter & Maxwell, 2006). Naturally occurring peer interactions can still be infrequent, particularly for students with severe disabilities who use AAC (Carter & Maxwell, 2006; Chung & Carter, 2013; Therrien, Light & Pope, 2016). Opportunities for communicative interactions should be created when they do not seem naturally evident (Hunt, et al.)

There are multiple benefits for all students when communication participation is facilitated for students with CCN within their school and classroom communities (Carter & Maxwell, 2006). Opportunities for practising a wide variety of social and communication skills in meaningful and motivating contexts can be provided in inclusive schools in a way that is not possible in other settings (Biggs, Carter & Gustafson, 2017; Hunt, Doering, Maier & Mintz, 2009). It is important to harness the opportunities available in today’s classrooms to influence peer attitudes toward children who use AAC (Beck, Bock, Thompson & Kosuwan, 2002).

As educators, we must support all of our students, including beginning communicators, and provide the reasonable and necessary supports that will enable their participation on the same basis as their peers. This resource highlights practical considerations for teachers of students who are beginning to use AAC. Inclusive school settings have been the focus, with an emphasis on developing cultures where diversity is celebrated, and where genuine efforts are made to embrace the needs of beginning communicators in order to support these students to develop friendships with their peers that can be effective now and into the future.

Creating an Inclusive Culture where AAC is Valued as Communication

Having a person in the school community who has complex communication needs may be the first exposure children have to Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC). Children are generally curious, and want to know about things that are new, but may not know how to ask about AAC, or how to communicate with their peer.

No matter the size of a school, understanding should be developed at a whole school level, within the classroom, and within key groups of peers (eg. children keen to befriend their AAC using peer, children with whom the AAC user is looking to engage, or children in a group or club the AAC user attends) to build an understanding of how each student communicates. Some basic skills about how to effectively communicate with this member of the community could easily enhance the schooling experience for everyone.

All members of a school community can be involved in helping a beginning communicator to build their skills. Communication partners for people who use AAC are often limited to their immediate family and their paid supports (Beukelman & Mirenda, 2005). Creating wider circles of communication for AAC users is something that often requires a conscious effort, at least as a starting point. It is vital to develop a shared understanding of multi-modal communication and a culture where all attempts at communication are valued and acknowledged. AAC must be seen as a method that holds as much value as speech in all aspects of communication at school.

For a student who uses AAC, opportunities to participate can easily be limited if peers are unaware of the barriers AAC users face that can limit the typical back-and-forth conversation that may generally occur (Therrien, Light & Pope, 2016). Teaching peers about how their AAC-using classmate communicates is vital in enabling relationships to be built. Typically, AAC users require time to generate a response. For beginning communicators, this can be even more significant and needs to be explicitly highlighted to support effective interactions in the busy school environment. It can also be important for the beginning communicator to learn strategies for engaging their peers. Often, due to past experience, they may not see themselves as an active participant in class or social relationships. Engaging peers and the beginning communicator in the process can help everyone to see how to form and build relationships (Sampson, 2019).

Building a culture where multi-modal communication is valued can be supported in a variety of ways across a variety of contexts within the school setting. Some considerations for how this may be done are included in the following pages.

Valuing AAC in the Classroom

Most primary school students spend a large portion of their school week in the same classroom, with the same group of peers. There are expectations on children to interact with their classmates in a variety of ways, including socially and in the context of academic learning. This expectation should be no different when a classmate uses AAC, but the way that the interactions typically occur may need to change. Students who use AAC communicate differently than those who do not, and classmates should be given explicit teaching about how to communicate with each other (Hunt, et al., 2009).

While it can feel time-consuming for teachers to learn AAC systems and to adapt activities for the successful inclusion of students with CCN, it is necessary. Teachers must be able to communicate effectively and efficiently with their students for education to be successful (Kent-Walsh & Light, 2003). When teachers model an attitude that values all communication attempts by a beginning communicator, this attitude will likely be reflected by their students.

There is much that can be done to create a culture where all communication is valued equally in the classroom. Building a shared understanding of the value of multi-modal communication is key in establishing an inclusive classroom culture for beginning communicators. Such a culture would contribute significantly to the likelihood of beginning communicators developing friendships in their school community. It may also concurrently support the inclusion of other students who may have other challenges related to social engagement with their peers.



Value AAC within the Physical Environment

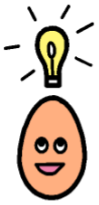
First and foremost, ensure that the beginning communicator has
**easy access to their AAC
 at ALL times!**

Consider the physical placement of the beginning communicator within your classroom.

- ▶ Does it promote the belief that every member of the class is valued and included?
- ▶ Do they have access to their peers for the purpose of communicating for social and academic purposes?
- ▶ Do they have access to their systems at all times, and is the system valued as a valid voice when contributing to class discussions?

Use symbols in the classroom, such as visual schedules, labelled items, and posters and signs, to promote a culture that embraces multi-modal communication.

In the classroom, display tips on how to be an effective communication partner and refer to these regularly.



Explicit Teaching

For many primary school students, exposure to AAC may have been limited, and being in a class with an AAC user may be the first time they have seen or heard about this form of communication. An opportunity exists to develop understanding within the class, and to build skills in communication partnering that could benefit all students now and into the future.

Students cannot be expected to automatically develop the skills and understanding required to be effective communication partners for AAC users if they are not provided with any advice or training on how to do so. Ideally, someone with expert knowledge in AAC would be providing this training (Gallagher and Litton, 2014; King & Fahsl, 2012; Raghavendra, et al., 2012).

Not every student in the class needs to be able to be an expert partner, however, like you would expect each verbal student to communicate with each of their peers at certain times (eg. group and partner work, whole class activities, and basic social etiquette within the classroom), it is fair to expect that each classmate of an AAC user should at least have some level of basic understanding of how to interact with their AAC-using peer. In the case of beginning communicators, this would often occur in collaboration with a more experienced communication partner (eg. teacher or teacher aide), but there are a few key considerations that it would be of benefit for all classmates to know.

- ▶ How will I know that my classmate has something to say?
- ▶ How does my classmate communicate?
- ▶ How can I best communicate with them?

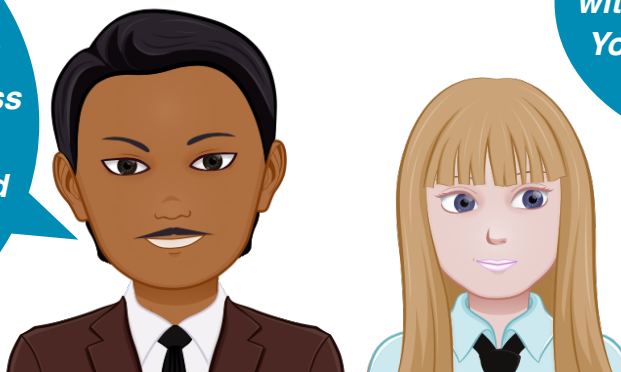
To learn how to use AAC, a beginning communicator must be spoken to using AAC (Sampson, 2018). If classmates can learn to model even a few words and sentences for these peers, the effects could be astronomical.

Children want to talk with other children!

This is no different for students who have CCN but the natural interactions are less likely to occur, and facilitation and training is required for peers.

The speech therapist who supports the beginning communicator in my class came to talk to our students about AAC and how their classmate used his tools.

Tip: Ask for advice about how your student communicates from their most familiar partners.



I had never seen someone talk with a computer before. You have to be a good listener.

Tip: Find ways for the beginning communicator to successfully display their communication skills to the whole class.



Invite a Competent AAC User to Visit Your Classroom

Exposing peers of a beginning communicator to someone who uses AAC more effectively to communicate could be a positive way to encourage peers to value AAC as a means of communication. *Tip: If you don't know any other AAC users, you could contact an organisation such as AGOSCI. It may be appropriate to pay this visitor for their time, as you would other special guest presenters.*

Students could be given the opportunity to ask questions about AAC challenges and successes to this person, and to ask how they might be able to support their peer to become a more successful communicator.

When access to an AAC mentor may not be possible, use of YouTube videos showing competent AAC use could also support understanding.

Consider inviting an AAC user to read a book to students at a school event such as Under 8s Day or National Simultaneous Story Time.



Make AAC Available to All Students

With permission, allow peers to 'have-a-go' of their classmate's systems. Allow them to explore a communication book or app, and to attempt to develop a message (King & Fahsl, 2012).

Include AAC-rich materials in the class library. Try to source books that include characters who use AAC (King & Fahsl, 2012), and where possible, have old systems available for classmates to explore at their leisure (eg. iPad with communication apps, PODD books, sign language resources).

In the early years classroom, add AAC into the play corner. Create toys that replicate a speech generating device or communication book. Add a harnessed device to a doll or teddy.

Use signing and symbol cards as part of general class routines such as an attention grabbing strategy (eg. teacher says "1, 2, 3", students sign "eyes on me"); for quick answer questions (eg. "true & false", or "yes & no" cards); or for indicating requests for class routines (eg. use of a 'help' card placed on desk, 'toilet' symbol pass out).

Tip: Ask parents and therapists if they have any old systems lying around that they would be willing to send to class.

Once my students had a chance to explore AAC more closely, they were more eager to engage with their classmate.

I like learning how to use the iPad to ask questions about my friend. She can even tell us jokes and play songs.

Tip: We learn through play and exploration. Offer multiple opportunities for all students to connect with AAC.



Valuing AAC in the Wider School Community

Development of a whole school approach to valuing multi-modal communication will support true inclusion for AAC users in their school communities. While students and staff from the wider school community may not need to communicate with the student who uses AAC on a regular basis, it is beneficial for all community members to have a basic understanding of how a student communicates, and how they can communicate with the student if the opportunity arises.

AAC users communicate differently from those who communicate with natural voice, and significant effort is required from both parties to ensure communication success (Beukelman & Mirenda, 2005; Carter & Maxwell, 2006; King & Fahsl, 2012). A three-way attention split is described as a unique challenge faced by AAC users: attention to communication partner; attention to internal development of message; and attention to the object through which the communication is conveyed. Similarly, communication partners are required to split their attention between the person communicating and the AAC system (Beukelman & Mirenda, 2005). It is reasonable to suggest that for most people, the skills to becoming an effective communication partner for an AAC user would require some practice and training. It can also be assumed that some basic understanding for all community members about how an AAC user communicates can only increase the likelihood of a school culture where AAC is valued.

In all classrooms across a school, opportunities for incidental learning about CCN and AAC should be embraced. There are many links within curriculum that would lead to direct discussion about diversity (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, n.d.) and this could strategically be linked to consideration of diversity within communication strategies or access methods.

Having opportunities to look closely at the tools being used by an AAC user may be of interest and benefit to students within the school. It is likely that many speaking students in any given school community have interactions with students who are not necessarily in their own class or grade. Significant barriers exist for students who have little to no speech (Beukelman & Mirenda, 2005; Hunt, et al., 2009), and even the most basic interactions with unfamiliar partners may need facilitation.

The following pages include ideas for ways to address AAC education across the wider school community.





Words at the Ready

Program interactional vocabulary into the students device, or have easily accessible in a paper-based system. Use high interest topics that would be of interest to peer groups (eg. Chatting about a recent event, a new fad or toy, or something happening in the school community).

Encourage the use of personalised ‘about me’ statements, and corresponding questions that encourage back and forth interactions. *Tip: These are built into many commercial AAC systems and will just require personalisation, and modelling of use. Look for buttons and sections such as “My Stories” or “News and Stories”.*

Conversely, teach all students a few basic signs, or how to use easily accessible symbols for greetings (eg. “hello” on a student’s wheelchair tray; teach all students in the school how to sign “How are you today?”). This could support multi-modal initiation of communication by all community members.



School Assemblies and Parades

Include symbols from the students AAC system in visual schedules or slide show presentations used to support these events, that are visible to all.

Model a key word or phrase of the month to the whole school, and encourage students to attempt to model this for the AAC user once across the month.

Consider hosting a special assembly during AAC Awareness Month (October) or in alignment with another special event, where AAC is the focus.

Tip: Ask the student and their family first.

Tip: Find ways to talk about AAC in all classes. Draw links to the curriculum, or address questions as they arise.

There’s a girl at my children’s school who communicates with a book of symbols. None of my children are in her year level, but they are all interested in finding out more about how this book is used. My youngest daughter has a lot of questions about it, and I’m not really sure about it myself! I’d like to be able to encourage her interest and enthusiasm so she can engage with this student positively.

I joined the signing choir at my school.

Tip: A signing choir or club can promote great community awareness of AAC.





A Symbol-Rich School Environment

Use visual symbols that match student AAC symbol sets to label common places in the school environment (eg. Library, Office, Tuckshop, Hall).

Create a symbol version of the tuckshop/canteen menu to support access for AAC users and to provide a visual cue for all students.

Consider the inclusion of static communication displays in the school environment.

While commercially available products exist, it is also possible to develop these resources at a school level, incorporating language that is typically used in different environments around the school onto printed and laminated boards. *Tip: Enlist the help of a speech therapist to support vocabulary selection and presentation.*



Learning Opportunities

Embrace natural opportunities to discuss multi-modal communication in all classrooms.

Look for resources that include AAC users when providing stimulus for students across a range of subject areas.

Create a whole school plan that explicitly addresses the use of AAC across all year levels. Revisit this plan regularly, and particularly as any new AAC users as they start at the school. Each student will communicate in a unique way.

At staff meetings, have a focus that supports peer interactions (eg. multi-modal greetings, learn a sign of the week/month). This could be shared with each class and visual reminders could be shared around the school.

Tip: Consider ways that AAC can be incorporated naturally in school activities. Encourage AAC users to participate in whole school events.

I was acutely aware that no one outside of my child's class had seen her communication device, given that it was mounted to her school desk. The school "Talent Show" was a great opportunity to get the device out in front of the whole school. Playing xylophone with your eyes is a talent that impresses community members of all ages!

Tip: Add visuals to regular routines.

We are using a "Welcome to Country" at our staff meetings and assemblies that has been visually enhanced through the use of PCS symbols. We try to use visual schedules at our meetings too.



Finding & Creating Opportunities

The social interactions, activities and routines provided at school provide multiple opportunities for the establishment of friendships (Ostvik, Ytterhus & Balandin, 2018; Raghavendra, Olson, Sampson, McInerney & Connell, 2012). Opportunities exist in even the most routine tasks and activities to promote language and symbol-rich experiences for all. Teachers are generally experienced in finding 'teachable moments', or opportunities for learning in a variety of school contexts. This approach should be extended to find the moments where opportunities for rich communicative interactions can exist.

For full social participation of students who are beginning communicators to occur, more is needed than just their physical presence in a general education classroom. Positive peer relationships are built on a history of successful interactions. When interactions with beginning communicators are repeatedly unsuccessful, negative peer attitudes and reduced motivation for future interactions can occur (Goldstein & Morgan, 2002). Comprehensive efforts from knowledgeable team members to increase the incidence of positive and successful interactions between AAC users and their peers can have a significant impact (Hunt, et al., 2009).

When opportunities may not seem evident or easily used to promote interactions, it can be helpful to create them (Hunt, et al., 2009). Develop reasons for peers to need to interact and communicate, ensuring opportunities for skill development of the AAC user and their peers as they learn to effectively interact with each other. Consider the general population of the school, and observe what promotes social interactions at any given time. When teachers consider the vocabulary used and the reasons for communications for these students, they will be better prepared to help to engineer opportunities for social interactions for beginning communicators (King & Fahsl, 2012).

Peer interactions, and specifically the back and forth exchanges between individuals, have been noted as contributing to the development of friendships (Therrien, Light & Pope, 2016). Partner behaviour in facilitating communicative interactions has been shown to have effects upon peers' provision of time given to AAC users to complete a message, and to continue actively listening (Carter & Maxwell, 2006). This highlights the importance of explicitly teaching children to allow their AAC-using peers to take communicative turns and is reflected in the work of Burkhart and Musselwhite (2001). Social scripts can support students in learning to claim, start, and maintain turns in a conversation and place an emphasis on social closeness (Burkhart and Musselwhite, 2001).



Opportunities in the Classroom

Students may be more willing to include peers in positive classroom interactions than in the playground (Kent-Walsh & Light, 2003). Beck et al. (2002) emphasise the importance of harnessing the opportunities available in today's classrooms to influence peer attitudes toward children who use AAC. Truly inclusive educational programs will provide many of these opportunities quite naturally.



Engineering the Environment

Where opportunities don't appear to exist, create them! Provide displays that enable peers and beginning communicators to make selections (eg. Paint colour) for items they will need (Gallagher & Litton, 2014; Sampson, 2019). This provides multiple models of requesting, through a Universal Design for learning approach.

Try encouraging interaction through sharing items between peers - AAC users and their peers may need to request items from each other.

Have Aided Language Displays in key areas of the classroom such as a reading communication board near the class books or in a library bag, or a block-related board with building materials. *Tip: Include fun vocabulary like "Uh-oh" and "Wow!"*



Go Big

Use interactive whiteboards, projectors and large interactive posters in the classroom that match a students system.

Some companies sell commercially made posters, or files that can be printed in poster size to allow whole group modelling and use. Some companies offer free licensing options for professionals that can support access in this way.

Other communication systems may be projected directly from a device, or via a computer version onto the class IWB. Students could take turns at using the system to model sentences related to classroom discussions.

Opinion pages could be used to communicate how all students feel about tasks and activities.

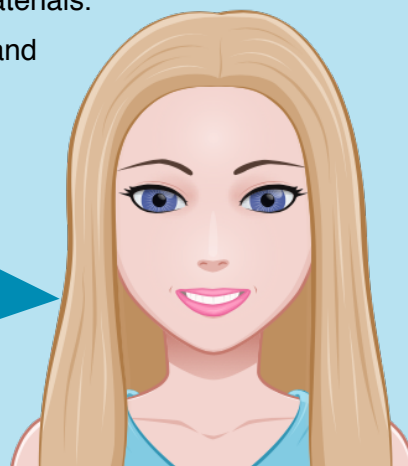
Description pages could be used for warm up activities within maths, literacy, and other subject areas.

Students could model choices of colours for selecting art materials.

A question page could be displayed and used during show and tell or other oral presentations.

My class love it when I connect the Podd app to the class whiteboard and let them take charge of modelling chat in the context of our class activities.

Tip: Choose at least one class routine to model daily on the IWB.





Weekly Focus

Select a weekly communication focus. This may be a core word, for use across different contexts or a pragmatic focus such as “Let’s go”. *Tip: For ideas on implementing a core word approach, check out the AssistiveWare Core Word Classroom (AssistiveWare, 2018) or Core Words for Classroom and Home (Jacobs, 2018). For tips on practising pragmatic pathways, explore Interactive Speech Pathology’s (Theodorsen, 2017) PODD Focus Handouts, or Two Way Street’s (Sampson, 2018) EXPAND program.*

Display this weekly focus and find ways to link it to things happening in the classroom. Value multi-modal communication, presenting the word in text, sign, and visuals.

The word or focus could be used as a stimulus to develop writing skills, collect additional vocabulary, expand creativity by finding ways to use the word or phrase throughout the week in meaningful ways.

If every classmate tries to find one moment each week (or better yet, each day!) to model the word or phrase with their peer who is beginning to use AAC, imagine the increased modelling opportunities that would occur. A class tally might be used to track modelling attempts.



Activity-Specific Boards

Consider use of Aided Language Displays in specific tasks and activities.

ALDs might be placed around the room with certain materials and activities, or brought out to support group rotations. Benefits can be had by all learners in the early years classrooms, as early literacy learners are exposed to visual clues to support early reading and use of vocabulary.

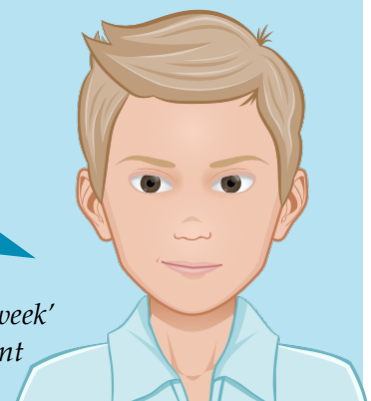
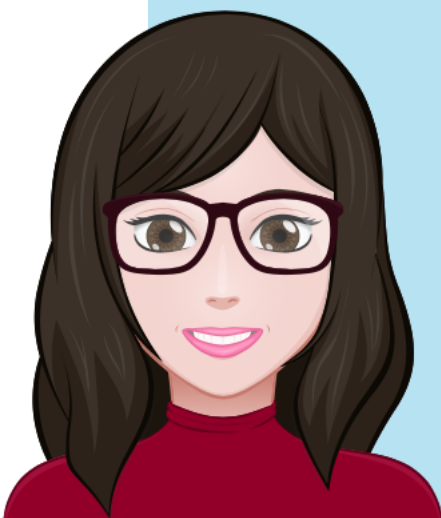
For guided reading activities, use a communication system to talk about the books being read. Opinions is a great starting point, or try to find a focus core word or pragmatic pathway to follow.

Tip: Modelling in a group can take the pressure off reluctant users, and ‘normalise’ AAC use.

I use modelling of AAC in our guided reading groups. I give all my students a turn to create a message. The kids get very engaged, and the AAC user in our class enjoys his peers modelling for him and learns so much from them.

Every week, our class learn a new sign and symbol. It’s fun!

Tip: Try to connect a ‘word of the week’ to your curriculum so it’s relevant and useful for all.





Student Placemats or Mini Boards

Use symbols to match the students AAC system on all student desk mats. Encourage use of opinions, feelings, and chat words.

Create boards for everyone to support activities within the classroom, such as asking questions during sharing times, or vocabulary to support literacy or maths lessons (eg. book reading vocabulary; numbers, more, less).



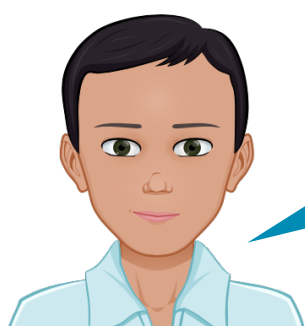
Class Parties or Game Time

Use Aided Language Displays to support party times. Try providing vocabulary specific to talk about the food, games and special activities.

Select games that are language-rich, and develop communication boards to go with these (eg. Guess Who, Go Fish, Twister).

For an end of year class party, I sent in a box of jellybeans with nice and nasty flavours, and an ALD to encourage chat around the treats. It was great to see the kids engaging with each other and giving my daughter opportunities to get in on the game too.

TIP: Build AAC use into a range of activities, including work, daily play, and special events.



My class mate can use his device to roll a dice. We can play any games we like together now.

TIP: Find fun ways to use systems to build social connections.



Modelling Bingo

Create a 'BINGO' board of communication functions.

Peers can mark off a square each time they provide a model for their classmate.

This strategy could also be a useful one for teachers and aides, or may be used as a whole class board.



Go Boards

Use a specific ALD based on modelling 'Places We Go', attached the the students mobility equipment (or classroom door for independently mobile AAC users).

Create a class job that involves modelling a sentence about where we are going to the student each time they leave the classroom.



Partner Power and Group Work

Help peers to plan genuine ways for their AAC-using peer to contribute to partner and group tasks. Opportunities for collaboration happen daily in most classrooms (King & Fahsl, 2012).

When planning activities, consider how beginning communicators can participate - use Universal Design for Learning principles (CAST, 2008).



Links to the Curriculum

One of the biggest challenges for classroom teachers can be the overwhelming feeling of a crowded curriculum. With so much to cover, it is important to consider how AAC use can be explicitly and implicitly linked to the curriculum, and *not* seen as something extra needing to be addressed. Some specific content descriptors that may support integration of AAC into the regular curriculum are identified below.

For the beginning communicator, communication will likely be the focus of their goals, and therefore the focus of all teaching and learning.

When teaching peers *about* AAC and *how* to be effective peer models, consider existing curriculum contexts and achievement standards and find direct links. Demonstrating their understanding of AAC could be part of all students' learning and assessment.

Use speech generating devices to build student understanding around digital literacies (Wilson-Burns, 2018).

Acknowledge AAC as another literacy and help everyone to appreciate and value that.

Recognise teachable moments where AAC can be used or discussed in the context of current classroom learning.

Suggested Australian Curriculum Content Descriptors that could explicitly include or focus on AAC

Technologies

Foundation to Year 2:

Recognise and explore digital systems (hardware and software components) for a purpose (ACTDIK001).

Explore how people safely use common information systems to meet information, communication and recreation needs (ACTDIP005).

Year 3 and 4:

Identify and explore a range of digital systems with peripheral devices for different purposes and transmit different types of data (ACTDIK007).

Explain how student solutions and existing information systems meet common personal, school, or community needs (ACTDIP012).

Year 5 and 6:

Design a user interface for a digital system (ACTDIP018).

Explain how student solutions and existing information systems are sustainable and meet current and future local community needs (ACTDIP021).

TIP: Through providing peer support, students can demonstrate competencies aligned with digital literacy.



I can support my friend to set up his system, and to open his communication software.

Valuing diversity is part of what I teach, and it links well to discussions about valuing AAC as communication.

TIP: Embracing diversity within the classroom can bring curriculum to life.



English

Foundation:

Understand that English is one of many languages spoken in Australia and that different languages may be spoken by family, classmates and community (ACELA1426).

Understand that language can be used to explore ways of expressing needs, likes and dislikes (ACELA1429).

Year 1:

Understand that people use different systems of communication to cater to different needs and purposes and that many people may use sign systems to communicate with others (ACELA1443).

Understand that language is used in combination with other means of communication, for example facial expressions and gestures to interact with others (ACELA1444).

Year 2:

Understand that language varies when people take on different roles in social and classroom interactions and how the use of key interpersonal language resources varies depending on context (ACELA1461).

Year 3:

Understand that successful cooperation with others depends on shared use of social conventions, including turn-taking patterns, and forms of address that vary according to the degree of formality in the social situations (ACELA1476)

Year 4:

Identify features of online texts that enhance readability including text navigation, links, graphics and layout (ACELA1793).

Interpret ideas and information in spoken texts and listen for key points in order to carry out tasks and use information to share and extend ideas and information (ACELY1687).

Year 5:

Understand the use of vocabulary to express greater precision of meaning, and know that words can have different meanings in different contexts (ACELA1512).

Use interaction skills, for example paraphrasing, questioning and interpreting non-verbal cues and choose vocabulary and vocal effects appropriate for different audiences and purposes (ACELY1796)

Year 6:

Understand that different social and geographical dialects or accents are used in Australia in addition to Standard Australian English (ACELA1515).

Health and Physical Education

Foundation Year:

Practice personal and social skills to interact positively with others (ACPPS004).

Year 1 and 2:

Describe ways to include others to make them feel they belong (ACPPS019).

Recognise similarities & differences in individuals and groups and explore how these are celebrated and respected (ACPPS024).

Year 3 and 4:

Describe how respect, empathy and valuing diversity can positively influence relationships (ACPPS037).

Year 5 and 6:

Practise skills to establish and manage relationships (ACPPS055).

Identify how valuing diversity positively influences the wellbeing of the community (ACPPS060).

Opportunities in the Playground

For students with CCN, and particularly those who also have physical disabilities that may limit their capacity to move in the same way as their peers, social interactions in the playground can be challenging (Anderson, Balandin & Clendon, 2011). Consideration should be given to how to promote interactions at these times.

Peers assuming a role as communication partner will likely bring challenges and satisfactions. Therrien, Light, and Pope (2016) report that peers may be less likely to be responsive to communicative attempts made by students with CCN than adult communication partners. Others highlight the possible multiple and varied opportunities that peers can offer in naturally reinforcing communication efforts (Carter & Maxwell, 2006). Children are often less predictable in their responses and may be less invested in the communication success of the person with CCN. This is particularly evident outside of structured environments, beyond the classroom walls, where conversations may be more difficult to support (Therrien, Light & Pope, 2016). These concerns highlight the need for dedicated programs that address challenges and ensure benefits for all students.

Responsive interaction strategies such as *Stay, Play and Talk* (Goldstein, Schniedler, Thiemann, 2007) can be used to simplify directions to help children increase social interactions. Stay with your friend: stay close, move when you friend does; Play with your friend: share, take turns; Talk with your friend: comment about activities, respond to their communication.

The Circle of Friends program (Newton & Wilson, 2012), and Jack's Bunch of Mates (Kruger, 2018), are two other examples of programs targeted at intentional establishment of social networks for students at risk of isolation. When a targeted approach at social networking is used to support development of a social network for students who use AAC, an opportunity to build up the skills of the members as effective communication partners becomes available (Biggs & Meaden, 2018).



Target Smaller Groups

Create opportunities to encourage communication between the AAC user and students who they have shown an interest in connecting with, or who have shown an interest in them and their systems.

Use the playground interactions as an opportunity to model effective communication partner skills.

Start a communication club as a lunch time activity open to any interested students.



When my client's speech therapy sessions were delivered in the school library at lunch time, peers naturally joined in and my client was much more motivated to participate.



Communication-Rich Play Experiences

The use of communication boards or Aided Language Displays to support a variety of play-based activities could be considered and provided. Some possible activities of interest that could easily be promoted as language-rich experiences include:

- * Musical Instruments
- * Bubbles
- * DJ Dance Time (iPad and dance scarves)
- * Water Play
- * Transport Play
- * Let's Pretend Dress Ups (these could be themed eg. pirates, animals)

Using communication boards in the playground has been beneficial for our beginning communicators, but also for some of our students who are less socially confident.

Tip: Many students can benefit from having access to communication boards to support their play interactions.

Tip: For students with physical disabilities, having high interest activities available in a stationary location can encourage students to come to them, when them going to their peers may not be physically possible or easy.



Symbol-Rich Environments

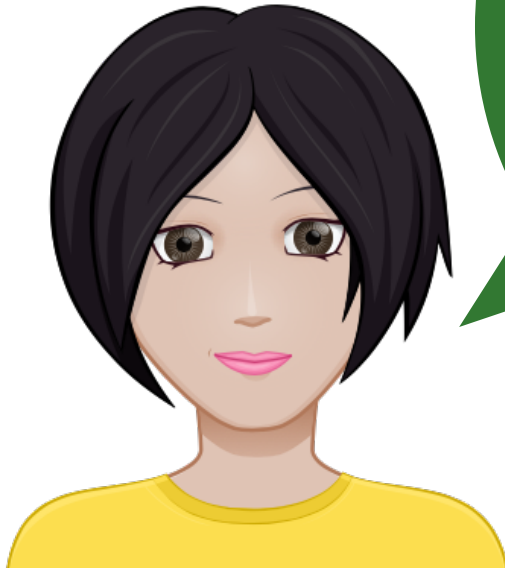
The use of symbols across the school environment can help to build a culture where multi-modal communication is valued and encouraged. Static communication displays can encourage peers to interact with symbols, and can create great opportunities for peer-modelling to AAC users if they are shown how to effectively use the resources. For the AAC users, just having access to symbols is not enough. They must also be given opportunities to have experience with the symbols across multiple environments.

While commercial options exist to support symbol-rich school environments and play spaces, peers could also be encouraged to develop their own chat boards for play ground use, selecting vocabulary appropriate to their specific contexts.

The use of symbols to label places in the school environment can also support this concept. This will also add meaning for the AAC user, as they map the visual cues at certain locations (eg. library, office, tuckshop) with the symbolic representations in their own AAC system.

Tip: Include the names of classmates (and other students in the school who connect regularly with the student) in the beginning communicator's system.

This allows the student to request peers, talk about peers, and comment on peers. Using peer names will also help build relationships.



When kids take an interest in my daughter's PODD, I tend to pounce and build on the natural opportunity to teach them a little bit more. I offer her peers the chance to give their opinion, or to tell where they have been, modelling the pathways and encouraging them to have a go. Ideally, there would be someone there every play time to help support these natural interactions, capitalising on these little opportunities that can have a huge impact on my child's education, and on her social success.

Tip: Consider the big impact a small investment in showing peers how to model could have for a beginning communicator.



Choices for Play Time

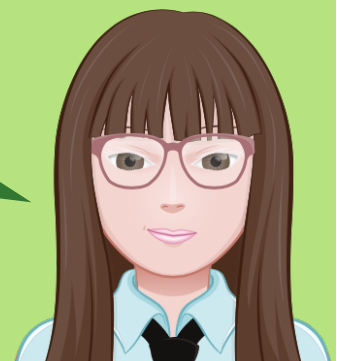
Provide easy ways for the beginning communicator to make choices about who they would like to play with, and where they might like to play.

Choice boards with symbols and names lists might be beneficial to support this.

One of my biggest worries for my son at school is about how he will join in play. When I think about my time at school it's about the fun I had with my friends, not the work I did. I want my kid to have a say in what he does at lunch, like all his classmates do. Using visuals to make a choice has been helpful.

I'm still learning how to use my friend's full system, but I know how to use her choice board to ask her to pick where we are going to play each day.

Tip: Have peers determine suitable and interesting choices for play time.



Tools for the Beginning Communicator

Just as peers need to be taught how to communicate best with their AAC-using classmate, explicit teaching will likely be required for the AAC user around how to develop and maintain conversational skills and social interaction skills that will lead to developing friendships.

Children who use AAC can easily become very egocentric in their communications if socially appropriate vocabulary is not included in their system, and if they are not taught how to effectively engage in and maintain conversations with others (Porter, 2019). Often early communicators may have access to scripted information about themselves such as their name, age, interests and dislikes. It is just as important for these students to have easy access to vocabulary that allows them to ask questions about others, and to continue conversations (Porter, 2019). Including quick-fire phrases like “Tell me more about that”, “What do you think about that?” or “How about you?” can increase conversational turns and help to maintain interactions.

Ensuring that beginning communicators have tools at their fingertips to support social interactions can go a long way in supporting improved peer connections.



Peer Names

Include peer names in systems.
If necessary, gain permission from parents to use student names and images for this purpose.



Videos

Ensure access to videos of activities and events from the student's life. When a beginning communicator is more effective at planning a message outside of the busy school environment, try capturing videos of such successes to share with peers.



About Me & Personal Stories

Most robust systems will include a space for personalisation about a student's personal details, likes and dislikes, and for personal stories.

Ensure this is updated to reflect changes and maintain interest.
Pair with opportunities to ask peers questions about the same things.



Jokes

Add jokes into the student's system. Keep the material fresh!
Select a peer or sibling who can take responsibility for helping to update the joke pages regularly.



Age-appropriate Vocabulary

What words and phrases are being used by speaking peers? What are the hot topics of discussion in the classroom and playground? Are these being reflected in the system of the AAC user?

Peers and siblings could help to ensure this lingo is correct.

Tip: Silly phrases and lines from movies can be effective in promoting social interactions.

Creating an Inclusive Culture where AAC is Valued as Communication

TEACHER CHECKLIST

Valuing AAC in the Classroom

Physical Environment

- ☐ Consider physical placement of student.
- ☐ Ensure access to AAC at ALL times.
- ☐ Use symbols in the classroom.
- ☐ Display tips on being an effective communicator partner.

Explicit Teaching

- ☐ Teach classmates how the AAC user communicates (perhaps ask an expert).

Invite a Competent AAC User to Class

- ☐ Invite a guest speaking AAC user.
- ☐ Give students a chance to ask questions.
- ☐ Explore YouTube Videos about AAC.
- ☐ Invite an AAC users to read to students at a special event (eg. National Simultaneous Story Time).

Make AAC Available to All Students

- ☐ Let students 'have a go' (with permission).
- ☐ Add AAC-rich resources to the class library.
- ☐ Include AAC in play corners.
- ☐ Use signs and symbols as part of routines and attention grabbers.

Whole School Considerations

Words at the Ready

- ☐ Program interactional vocabulary into student's device.
- ☐ Encourage 'About Me' chat.
- ☐ Teach AAC user how to use questions and continuers.
- ☐ Make greetings easily accessible.
- ☐ Teach community members how to use some greeting signs or symbols.

School Assemblies and Parades

- ☐ Use symbols in presentations.
- ☐ Present a word of the week or month.
- ☐ Host an AAC awareness assembly (consult with family).

A Symbol-Rich School Environment

- ☐ Use symbols to label school locations.
- ☐ Create a symbol-based Tuckshop menu.
- ☐ Include static communication displays in the school environment.

Learning Opportunities

- ☐ Embrace incidental teaching opportunities about multi-modal communication.
- ☐ Use stimulus including AAC users across all subject areas.
- ☐ Include AAC as an explicit teaching focus across all year levels in whole school planning documents.
- ☐ Use staff meetings as an opportunity to build capacity across whole of staff.

Finding & Creating Opportunities

TEACHER CHECKLIST

Opportunities in the Classroom

Engineering the Environment

- Require all students to request items using AAC (eg. Colour for paint).
- Include ALDs in key areas of the classroom (eg. Reading corner).

Go Big

- Present AAC on IWB or large poster.
- Allow students to model on big screen.
- Use specific pages as part of daily routines (eg. Questions page at share times; opinions after reading).

Weekly Focus

- Practise a word or pathway of the week.
- Display the current focus, using multi-modal representations.
- Find meaningful ways for all students to use the word or pathway.
- Encourage students to model the word or pathway to their peer at least once.

Activity-Specific Boards

- Use ALDs to support communication around specific tasks.
- Use opinion boards.
- Incorporate AAC modelling into guided reading group activities.

Student Placemats

- Provide all students with easy access to some form of AAC.

Class Parties and Game Time

- Use ALDs to promote party chat.
- Use ALDs to support game play.

Modelling Bingo

- Create a BINGO board of communicative functions, with class or student goals to model and mark off in a time frame.

Go Boards

- Use a "Places We Go" ALD and encourage peer modelling.

Partner Power & Group Work

- Use UDL to plan shared activities that allow genuine participation for all.

Links to the Curriculum

- Find genuine ways to learn about and through AAC in the context of the year level curriculum.

Opportunities in the Playground

Target Smaller Groups

- Be cognisant of peers with a particular interest in AAC and their AAC-using peer.
- Use natural interactions in the playground to model effective communication partner skills.

Communication-Rich Play Experiences

- Provide play options that encourage communication.
- Use ALDs or student system to demonstrate to peers how to model in this context.

Symbol-Rich Environments

- Use symbols to label locations and model their use.
- Teach peers how to use static communication displays in the school environment to model language.

Choices for Play Time

- Provide an easy way for AAC user to select where they would like to play, and who they might like to play with.
- Encourage peers to support this process and to invite peer to play.

Tools for the Beginning Communicator

TEACHER CHECKLIST

Peer Names

- ☐ Include peer names in the systems of the AAC user.

About Me & Personal Stories

- ☐ Show AAC users and their peers how to access the “About Me” sections in a student’s system.
- ☐ Encourage AAC users to ask questions of their peers.

Videos

- ☐ Include videos of things the AAC user likes or has done.
- ☐ Record successful independent communication efforts to share with peers.

Jokes

- ☐ Include jokes in student system.
- ☐ Encourage peers to collect new jokes to add to the system.

Age-appropriate Vocabulary

- ☐ Ensure vocabulary is age-appropriate.
- ☐ Include topics of current interest for peers to encourage conversation.

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