

# Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)

## About AAC

You may have seen someone write in a notebook to answer a question. Maybe you have seen people using sign language or other gestures. You may have seen someone push buttons on a computer that speaks for them. These are all forms of augmentative and alternative communication, or AAC.

AAC includes all of the ways we share our ideas and feelings without talking. We all use forms of AAC every day. You use AAC when you use facial expressions or gestures instead of talking. You use AAC when you write a note and pass it to a friend or coworker. We may not realize how often we communicate without talking.

People with severe speech or language problems may need AAC to help them communicate. Some may use it all of the time. Others may say some words but use AAC for longer sentences or with people they don't know well. AAC can help in school, at work, and when talking with friends and family.

## Types of AAC

Do you or your loved one have difficulty talking? There are options that might help. There are two main types of AAC—unaided systems and aided systems. You may use one or both types. Most people who use AAC use a combination of AAC types to communicate.

### Unaided Systems

You do not need anything but your own body to use unaided systems. These include gestures, body language, facial expressions, and sign language.

### Aided Systems

An aided system uses some sort of tool or device. There are two types of aided systems—basic and high-tech. A pen and paper is a basic aided system. Pointing to letters, words, or pictures on a board is a basic aided system. Touching letters or pictures on a computer screen that speaks for you is a high-tech aided system. Some of these speech-generating devices, or SGDs, can speak in different languages.

## Working With A Speech-Language Pathologist

An SLP will test how well you or your loved one can speak and understand. The SLP can help find the right AAC system for you. You may use a basic system first and may need it for only a short time. This may happen if you had mouth surgery or a stroke and your speech comes back.

It may take some time to get a more high-tech system, if you need one. Not every device works for every person, so it is important to find the right one for you. The [Information for AAC](#)

[Users](#) webpage has more information about finding the best AAC system. Insurance or other funding can help you pay for your AAC device.

## AAC Users

Anyone who has a lot of trouble talking can use AAC. You may need it for a short time after surgery or an illness. You may need AAC as an adult after a stroke or head injury. Or, you may use AAC for most of your life. AAC can help you stay connected to others through speech, texting, or social media.

There are many disorders that cause severe communication problems. Some may be present from birth, like cerebral palsy or autism. Others happen after an illness or injury, like cancer or a stroke. Diseases that get worse over time can also cause problems speaking. These include Huntington's disease and amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or ALS.

Read a [personal story from an AAC user](#).

## Finding an AAC System

It is important that you find the AAC system that is right for you. Some people get a system that they don't like or that doesn't let them say what they want. They end up not using the system. Don't let this happen to you. Go to professionals who know about AAC and can help you to find the best system for you. You may need to go to a hospital or private clinic. Your child may get help at school. In some places, there are special AAC programs that can help.

To find the best AAC system, you may work with a team that includes you or your loved one and the following individual(s):

- Speech-language pathologist, or SLP
- Doctor
- Occupational therapist
- Physical therapist
- Social worker
- Learning specialist
- Psychologist
- Vision specialist
- Assistive technology professional

You may work with a vocational counselor to help you get back to work using AAC. You may also see a person who knows the technology, called a rehabilitation engineer.

This team will look at your speech and language, motor skills, vision, and more. They will look at how you communicate and what you need to be able to do. This information will help them decide what type of AAC system might be best for you.

Team members can help you find ways to pay for an AAC system. They can help you work with your insurance to pay for it. The team will help program the system, if needed. You may need to work

with someone to learn how to use the system. You may also need to make changes to your AAC system over time.

## Using AAC

Access is the way you make choices on your communication board or device. There are two main ways to access AAC—direct selection and scanning.

### Direct Selection

This includes pointing with some part of your body, like a finger, toe, or eyes. You may also point with a beam of light, headstick, or mouthstick. You can use switches if you are not able to point. You can touch the switch or turn it on by blowing into a tube or moving your eyebrow. Direct selection is the fastest way to make choices.

### Scanning

In scanning, you get one choice at a time. You have to point to or stop on the word or picture you want. A simple scanning system has someone show you a picture and ask, "Is this what you want?" The person will keep asking you this until you get to the right picture.

Some devices have lights that pass over each choice on the screen or board. You use a switch to stop the light on your choice. You may scan each letter to spell a word or scan to a picture of what you want. There are also scanners that use sounds or that scan the board or screen in patterns. You do not need to control your hands or feet to scan. But, you may need better thinking skills to learn how to scan.

## Communicating With AAC

There are three main ways you can use AAC to communicate. These include single-meaning pictures, alphabet systems, and pictures with more than one meaning. Most people use more than one type of system.

### ***Single-Meaning Pictures***

You do not need to read to use this type of AAC. Each picture means one thing, and you point or scan to the picture you want. You may need to learn what some pictures mean, since not every word has an easy picture to go with it. You need to have a lot of pictures to say everything you want to say. For example, a 3-year-old would need more than 1,000 pictures to have all the words he might want to say. This system is not used as much as the other types.

### ***Alphabet Systems***

You need to be able to read and spell to use this type of system. You have the letters of the alphabet in front of you, and you point or scan to each letter. Some systems are able to guess the word after the first few letters, which can save time.

### ***Pictures with more than one meaning.*** You may hear this called ***semantic compaction.***

You do not need to read to use this type of AAC. You put pictures together to form words and phrases. One picture can mean different things when combined with other pictures. For example, a

picture of a frog can mean frog, jump, or green. If you point to a frog and a rainbow, you mean "green." If you point to a frog and an arrow, you mean "jump."

## Questions to Ask Your Speech-Language Pathologist

You should work with an SLP who knows about AAC. Here are some questions you can ask:

- Do you work with AAC a lot?
- How long have you worked with AAC? Have you worked with anybody who has a problem like mine?
- Do you work as part of a team? Who else is on the team?
- Will you see me for follow-up treatment after I get an AAC system?
- Where can I go to see and talk with people using AAC?
- How soon can you schedule testing? What will it cost? What kinds of payment do you accept?
- Are you able to help me find a way to pay for the AAC device?
- Will I be able to see the systems you think I should use? Where can I go to see it if you don't have it in your office?

There is information that you want to know after you have tried AAC. If you are not sure of the answer, talk with your SLP.

- What does the SLP think I can do to communicate with others?
- What system will I use to tell people how I feel? To ask questions? To talk with family? To say something short and fast? Will I use the same system or different ones?
- What symbols will be on the boards or devices? Will they have pictures, letters, or words?
- Can I use the AAC system in different places, like home, work, school, or with friends?
- Will I need to buy special equipment or switches?
- What will I need to do with my body to use the system? Will it help if I sit up or turn my head?
- Can the system change as my needs change?
- Why was the system chosen for me?
- Who will I work with to use the system? How often will I need to see them?
- Can I talk with someone who uses the system I am thinking about?

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