

PROVIDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUCCESSFUL USE OF AAC

According to the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA), “augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) includes all forms of communication (other than oral speech) that are used to express thoughts, needs, wants, and ideas.” In addition to non-speech communication such as facial expression, gestures, manual signs, and body language, AAC may include low technology aids such as picture cards, topic boards and communication boards for various environments. It may also include high technology devices with voice output. Picture symbols (such as Picture Communication Symbols by Mayer-Johnson and found in [Boardmaker](#) software), text, and photos may be used in both low- and high-tech aids to enhance an individual’s communication. Whatever AAC system is used, it is important to recognize that the goal is for at least two people to share thoughts successfully—that is, to communicate—and those communication partners may not necessarily be familiar listeners. Therefore, in order for AAC to be effective for the user, it must always be available, it must provide autonomy for the user to express needs and desires, share thoughts, direct others, express feelings, and comment, and it must provide a symbolic, text, and/or voice message for the listener. Since high-tech devices are not easily accessed in all environments (e.g. in the pool or outside in very bright sunlight), it is very likely and advisable that low-tech aids also be available in those situations to ensure

that the AAC user always has the opportunity to communicate.

It is the OPPORTUNITY to communicate that is the focus of this paper. Included are possible situations and related vocabulary that may be useful in enhancing the use of AAC in various environments. These are meant to serve merely as a *guide*, not an exhaustive list. It is hoped that they will provide the basis for thought on many additional scenarios in which AAC use may be encouraged for various users. Examples for both low- and high-tech aids will be offered, and it is important to recognize that practicing “scripted” scenarios does not mean that AAC devices need to be totally re-programmed. It means that vocabulary needs to be reviewed, some things may need to be programmed, and adequate opportunities for successful communication in those situations must be provided.

LOW-TECH SCENARIOS

- A. **In the bathtub** (a laminated communication board can be attached to the tile wall with suction cup fasteners)

VOCABULARY:

I need- soap
shampoo
towel
toys
more bubbles
washcloth

all done
cold
hot
that’s funny!
2 more minutes
no more



It is important to “set up” the environment so that communication is encouraged. For example, refrain from adding any toys to the tub, or offer toothpaste, instead of soap. Join in tub play and model “That’s funny!” Make tub time especially fun so that “2 more minutes” may be requested several times!

- B. **Outside in bright sunlight on the beach** (a laminated communication board or a notebook of protected pages is recommended)

VOCABULARY:

Let’s build
Let’s go for a walk
Let’s find shells
Let’s go in the water
Let’s get ice cream

Let’s play-Frisbee
ball
cars and trucks
kite
water

I need- towel
snack
swimmies
water shoes
bucket
shovel
digger

more
no more
I love it!
awesome!
I don’t like it!
all done
I’m tired
I’m hungry
I’m scared
I’m thirsty

Play with me
Bathroom

Again, all play items may be left in the beach bag until a request is made for something. You may mention some fun things to do (e.g. go for a walk, find shells, go in the water...) and then wait for a request, or you may make a point of indicating that you heard the bells of the ice cream truck, and then wait for a request to get ice cream. Instead of anticipating every need or desire or thought of the AAC

user, it is essential to allow opportunities for him or her to express those thoughts.

Please note that the suggested low-tech communication aids described above are situation-specific. They are supplemental and provide easy access to related vocabulary for the scenarios mentioned, but they certainly cannot replace the essential **core vocabulary** (i.e., the set of most frequently used nouns, pronouns, verbs and descriptors) of the user's low- and/or high-tech communication aid.

HIGH-TECH SCENARIOS

A. **Fast food restaurant**

Many voice output devices have food pages already programmed with a number of popular items. The main, or core, page would provide the vocabulary for organizing a request with page links to foods and social phrases. It is important to become familiar with these pages and supplement the vocabulary as necessary with additional food items and comments (e.g. "This tastes funny." "Check this out!"). Once again, opportunities to use the vocabulary are critical for enhancing the communication of an AAC user. A stop at Panera on the way home to get a couple of muffins for a snack, or a trip to Rita's for an Italian Ice are highly reinforcing communication opportunities! It is also a great way for an AAC user to recognize the power of

language when interacting with unfamiliar people who respond readily to the voice message.

B. **Family gathering**

Holidays and family celebrations are excellent times for an AAC user to practice social language. Phrases such as "How are you?" and "What's new?" are often included on the social pages of many voice output communication devices, but these can certainly be supplemented with more customized vocabulary as well. For example, "It's great to see you!" or "You look great!" may be desirable additions to the social page. Responses to others' questions may often be found within the feelings vocabulary or the social page (e.g. "I feel fine") or may involve use of the main/core page with links to other pages (e.g. "I like gym" when responding to a question about school). Vocabulary related to special events (such as school dances, Scout trips, et al.) should be available on the AAC device as well so that the user has access to them when sharing information with interested family members. It is suggested that family members be prompted with some appropriate questions to ask that have been practiced and role-played with the AAC user. As mentioned previously, it may be necessary to offer some guidance to the AAC user in finding desirable vocabulary, but it is extremely important to fade that assistance and allow the individual the opportunity to communicate independently.

It is hoped that these scenarios will stimulate ideas about countless other ways

to promote communication throughout the AAC user's daily routine. Communication should not be limited by the environment; it is up to us to adapt the environment to the needs of the AAC user and provide ample opportunities to communicate.

References

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA), "What is AAC?" www.asha.org

Picture Communication Symbols (PCS), Boardmaker software, Mayer Johnson, LLC www.mayer-johnson.com

ALTERNATIVE AND AUGMENTATIVE COMMUNICATION



Providing Opportunities For Success

By
MaryDee Atkins,
M.S., CCC-SLP



Readington Road
North Branch, NJ
www.midlandschool.org

Midland Publications, Coordinated
by Lois Parker ©The Midland School 1983