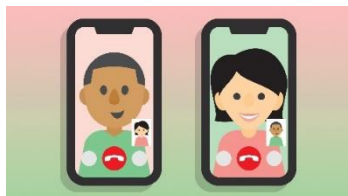


## Supporting AAC users to stay connected during Covid-19



We are living in an unprecedented time as a result of Covid-19. It is a stressful and anxious time for everyone, but even more so for individuals who face communication challenges. Now, more than ever, we need to find ways to facilitate communication and prevent people feeling isolated.

### **Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)**

Children with communication difficulties may require the use of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) supports in order to interact with those around them. These include unaided communication modes such as eye contact, facial expression, body language, gesture, and signing (e.g. Lámh), and aided communication systems. These can be either low-tech (e.g. objects of reference, photo or symbol communication boards and books), or high-tech (e.g. Voice Output Communication Aids/ speech generating devices). More information on this can be found here: <https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Resource-5-A-Total-Communication-Approach.pdf>

### **AAC Users: Keeping in Touch during Covid-19**

It is important that children using AAC supports still feel connected to their wider community. Luckily, we are also living in the time of computers and smartphones, with many apps available to support video chats.

Video chatting apps are a great way for children to stay in touch with family and friends. To help to make your child's connections interactive, try games, rhymes and songs that children can participate in and enjoy with a screen partner. This keeps the interaction social and fun. You could also use the time to share experiences.

Encourage a screen partner to read a favourite story to your child, and your child can follow along in their own book. Your child and their screen partner could also have the same toy to play with, or share a snack on screen.

### **Supporting your child to use technology to connect**

1. **Let your child take the lead:** where possible, allow your child to take the lead on the interaction e.g. pressing the button to call or hang up. You may need to initially show your child how to use the technology but encouraging them to take the lead will support their independence
2. **Explain that things may go wrong:** technical difficulties are often out of our control. Let your child know when the screen is frozen, or why a call drops. Through explaining these experiences in simple terms, your child will better understand how screen interactions work.
3. **Modes of Communication:** Encourage your child to use all modes of communication available to them during conversations e.g. a combination of speech/vocalisations, voice output communication aid, pictures/objects and signs/gestures.
4. **Positioning:** Ensure your child is positioned so that their screen partner can see them, and if they use one, their communication device e.g. communication book. Encourage your child's screen partner to position themselves so that your child can clearly see their face when they are communicating to allow them to read nonverbal cues such as facial expression and body language.

5. **Background noise:** Reduce background noise during any video calls.  
 Encourage your child's screen partner to monitor the noise levels in their environment.
  
6. **Time:** It is always important to allow time for pauses during interactions so that your child has time to communicate their message. For conversations using technology, your child's screen partner should be encouraged to allow even more response time to allow for any delays in transmission.

The following are a few of the choices of available technology to enable children who use AAC to stay in touch with others. This list is not exhaustive.

### **Whatsapp or Viber**

Most of us use these apps on our mobile devices. They can be used to communicate with individuals or groups by texting, recording audio or making video calls (with up to 4 people). This technology is very accessible, though your child may need support to make a call or send a message. It can be a fun way for your child to stay in touch with friends as they can share jokes, funny pictures or stories during this difficult time.

You and the people you are connecting with will need a phone number/SIM card in your mobile device in order to use these apps.



### **Echo Dot or Echo Show**

Some people find speech is the easiest way to access technology. The Amazon Alexa device can be used to access information, listen to audio books, radio and music and control smart devices in the home. It also supports a feature called 'Drop in'. This could be used to stay in touch with people who do not have a smart phone or tablet device or are not comfortable with technology. It works like an intercom. The person who is being 'dropped in on' just has to answer. They do not need to make commands or press buttons themselves.



## **Video Calling Tools**



### **Zoom**

Zoom is a free, video conferencing tool. Zoom calls are called 'meetings' and you can host them or join them if someone else has set them up. Your child is likely to need support to join or set up a meeting.

Zoom allows multiple people to video call at once and be on screen together. Group calls can be a great way to create a sociable atmosphere at home during this time of physical distancing. There is also the option to screen share, so things children have been making \*on their computer or photos of what they have been doing could be shared live during the conversation.

### **Skype**

Skype is very familiar to lots of people as it is one of the earliest video calling apps.

Skype calls can be recorded to capture special moments and there is a subtitles feature so that you can also read the words that are spoken.

Skype, like Zoom, also gives the option to screen share so that your child can share any computer based activities they have been doing.

## **This resource was informed by the following:**

1. [www.aaccommunity.net](http://www.aaccommunity.net)
2. [www.atandme.com](http://www.atandme.com)
3. [www.asha.org](http://www.asha.org)
4. [www.enableireland.ie/resources/publications/speech-and-language-tips-aac-multimodal-communications](http://www.enableireland.ie/resources/publications/speech-and-language-tips-aac-multimodal-communications)
5. [www.zerotothree.org/resources/2535-five-tips-to-make-the-most-of-video-chats](http://www.zerotothree.org/resources/2535-five-tips-to-make-the-most-of-video-chats)
6. <https://rerc-aac.psu.edu/communication-supports-for-children-and-adults-with-complex-communication-needs-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>