Autism and Augmentative Alternative Communication

A resource for tutors and teachers to support the Home or School Based Summer Programme

Learning Objective:

This resource provides information on 'Learning to Learn' specifically on developing communication skills for autistic students.

For some autistic students oral speech may not be their primary method of communication. They may use other methods to communicate. The use of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) gives children a voice and allows them to express their message to others.

What is AAC?

AAC involves all forms of communication except for oral speech to express needs, wants, thoughts and ideas. Examples of AAC are objects, use of signs, pictures and written text. AAC can be divided into **high-tech** and **low-tech** devices.

High-tech devices need a battery to work. A high-tech device allows a student to express themself using pictures, symbols or words that can be linked to an electronic voice output.
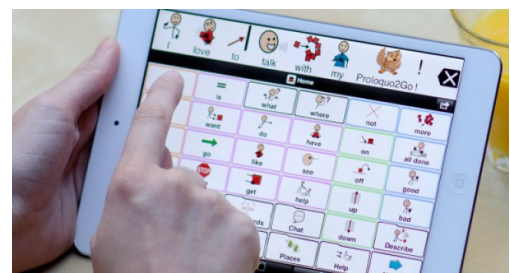
(source Advancing Opportunities)
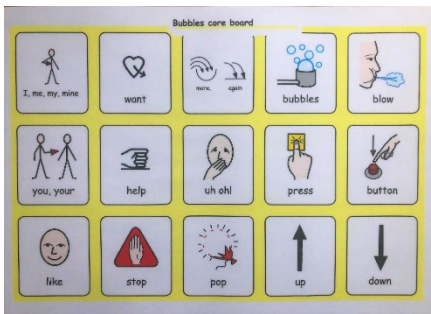
Low-tech devices refer to an AAC device that does not require a battery to use it, such as objects, communication books and boards with pictures and symbols.

What AAC devise to use?

Assessment is important before implementing a device. The assessment process can involve a Speech and Language Therapist and other professionals such as an Occupational Therapist, the student themselves and important people in the students life such as their parent and teacher. It is important to consider the child's environment, their preferences of AAC and to involve family members when deciding on the AAC.

Every autistic child is an individual and their mode of AAC needs to reflect the same. AAC needs to be adapted to suit the child, to utilize their current abilities and support their needs. High-tech AAC devices are often very motivating however, as we all know technology sometimes breaks or the battery will die so a low-tech AAC device should always be available as a back-up to continue to give a child using AAC a voice.

Top Tips for supporting an AAC user:

- **MODEL** the use of the AAC.
- Give the AAC user **time** to express their message.
- Be **consistent**! If using a device, use the same AAC device at school and at home.
- AAC is not just for requesting; AAC is also used to **initiate, comment, tell stories, ask questions and engage in a conversation with others.**
- **Create opportunities** for the AAC user to actively use their device/mode of AAC to interact with you and others both at home and in school.
- The device must **always be available** e.g. when you leave the classroom, you must take the AAC device with you or have another device available.

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- As the child's skills develop and their needs change, their device needs to be **updated** also to accommodate for this.
- Pay attention to **other cue's and gestures** that the AAC user uses e.g. facial expression, body language.
- In school or home environment, be mindful of how **noisy** it us and if the AAC user's device can be heard.

AAC in the community

Wexford County Council implemented a Communication Board in Min Ryan Public Park. The communication board includes letters, numbers, symbols and pictures and is colour coded for the different types of words. This is a fantastic initiative to make AAC more accessible in the community.

(source Local Government Information Unit)

Useful Links

- Communication boards: Symbol Charts - Resources | Ace Centre
- Learn AAC - AssistiveWare
- Min Ryan Park Communication Boards | Wexford County Council (wexfordcoco.ie)