

Myth:

People with severe communication impairments cannot learn communication skills

Introduction

Why should we try AAC if:

- “He doesn't seem to want to communicate.”
- “She doesn't seem interested in communicating with others.”
- “We just are not sure of her cognitive ability right now.”
- “You need to have certain pre-requisite skills first.”
- “He has very limited mobility. How would that even work?”

The comments above imply that an individual can be too impaired (or “too low”) to use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC), or at least to use more than a very simple form of AAC. Assumptions like these can limit AAC use, delay it, or prevent it altogether.

When Should We Introduce Formal AAC?

Formal AAC involves devices, signs, object/picture symbols, or other aides. Cynthia Cress, Ph. D. (2006), addresses this concern straightforwardly: “*When should we start introducing formal AAC into children's communication? When they are awake!*” This statement can be applied to adults as well.

There Are No Pre-Requisites to Using AAC.

Communication starts at birth, regardless of the mode of communication (e.g., crying, cooing, gestures, looking toward the person who is speaking). Because of this, children's natural actions and behaviors are the only prerequisites (Cress, 2006). Individuals (both children and adults) with very basic skills can use formal AAC for simple goals (e.g., cause and effect). It is never too early for communication devices. Communication devices can be:

- Very interesting!
- A way to show us how language and communication works.
- A way to learn and practice words.

Furthermore, for individuals with motor and/or cognitive limitations, a symbol or device can be a means to discover new ways of affecting the world around them. Even at an early point, children and adults can learn that communication devices are “worth the effort to use for a purpose” (Cress & Marvin, 2003).

Communication is a Right!

The National Joint Committee for the Communication Needs of Persons with Severe Disabilities (NJC), initiated efforts to develop national guidelines for developing and implementing educational programs to meet the needs of individuals with severe communication disabilities. The NJC created a Communication Bill of Rights that directly dismisses the “too impaired” myth!

All people with a disability of any extent or severity have a basic right to affect, through communication, the conditions of their existence. Beyond this general right, a number of specific communication rights should be ensured in all daily interactions and interventions involving persons who have severe disabilities.

References

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