

Myth:

Young Children Must Wait Until They Can Use AAC

Introduction

This myth stems from a few beliefs about young children and the use of AAC:

- Children must be a certain chronological age.
- There is a specific set of skills that a child must have first.
- A child must be able to communicate independently.



Let's take a closer look at what research tells us!

Does AAC Use Depend on Chronological Age?

There is no evidence to suggest that children must be a certain chronological age to benefit from AAC (Ronski & Sevcik, 2005). One of the primary concerns may be the belief that introducing AAC at an early age will impede the development of natural speech as the primary mode of communication. Research has shown that the introduction of AAC correlates with the improvement of natural speech, even in situations in which no speech therapy has been given (Ballinger, n.d.).

Are There Prerequisites to Introducing AAC?

Some people believe that a child must have specific skills to use AAC. For example, they may believe that a child needs to have certain cognitive skills like cause/effect (one event is caused by another), means-to-an-end (planning steps to a goal), object permanence (objects still exist even if not seen, heard, or touched), and others. Research has proven this to be incorrect.

Researchers Kangas & Lloyd (1988) reviewed a variety of early language studies and found that speech and language development and cognitive development are interrelated but not causal. Cognitive development does not lead to speech development or vice versa. In fact, the researchers note that "communication can also be a vehicle for expanding cognitive skills."

The reality of AAC for young children is that there are no prerequisites for communication when using AAC supports. Communication starts at birth, regardless of the mode of communication (e.g., crying, cooing, gestures, looking towards the person speaking), so their natural actions and behaviors are the only prerequisites (Cress & Marvin, 2003). Even at an early point, children (and adults) can learn that communication devices are "worth the effort to use for a purpose (Cress, 2006)" (e.g., communication).

Should Children Communicate Independently Before Getting an AAC Device?

People may also delay or withhold AAC because they believe that communication must be an independent act (completed without assistance). This view ignores the fact that none of us communicate independently. Even the most articulate speaker needs to be prompted to recall a word occasionally. Everyone is asked to clarify a statement or needs a cue to remember a detail. Communication does not happen in a vacuum. We rely on interaction with others to establish meaning (co-construction) and to provide assistance/support when needed (Cress & Marvin, 2003). This is especially true for young children. It would be backward to delay an AAC trial until an individual appears to communicate without assistance. Using AAC will help young children learn to communicate more independently.

What Is The Cost Of Waiting?



Communication and language development impact other skills, like cognition, reading, play, and social interaction. AAC has been proven to positively impact children's language, cognition, and reading skills. With AAC, children's participation in developmentally-important social, educational, and play environments increase as well (Branson & Demchak, 2009). In a recent study, researchers determined that AAC interventions may serve to improve even more developmental areas for very young children, such as physical movement skills.

The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2007) found that AAC interventions for young children have positive long-term benefits. The council stated that it is important to focus on AAC use with infants and toddlers because there is evidence that a child's early learning experiences during the first three years of life lay the foundation for later brain development.

Where Do We Begin?

Let's start by looking at AAC. Can an intervention approach that uses multiple modes of communication (including gestures, communication devices/boards/books, and natural speech) "incorporate a child's full communication abilities (Ronski & Sevcik, 2005)?"

AAC may play any of the following roles:

- Augmenting (supporting) a child's natural speech.
- Being a child's primary communication method.
- Being a system that helps a child to both understand (input) spoken language AND their communication mode (output).
- Serving as part of a language intervention strategy.

It's important to remember that AAC intervention is a decision based on communication needs, and that requirements and abilities will change as a child grows and progresses. AAC strategies and tools can and should be used to help the development of cognitive language abilities that further a child's acquisition of language and learning skills. AAC support should not be eliminated or delayed based on characteristics of a specific age group, but rather seen as a possible tool to overcome communication challenges for any individual who needs a way to supplement their speech.

References

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