AAC Myths Revealed

Myth:
If an individual has some (or even a little) speech, AAC is not needed.

True or False:
False

When the idea of AAC is suggested for an individual, communication partners might say:

- He says a few words or sentences really well.
- I can understand him/her at home…in school…in therapy.
- He can say full sentences after me.
- She repeats whole sentences that she hears in movies or on TV.
- We are going to wait and see if speech improves.
- We don't want her to rely on the computer and not learn speech.

Let's take another look at these statements and ask some additional questions.

He says a few words or sentences really well.	What about increasing his vocabulary?
I can understand him at home…in school…in therapy.	What about other people?
He can say sentences fully after me.	What about when you are not there?
She repeats while sentences that she hears in movies or on TV.	Are those appropriate responses in every conversation? How does she carry on a conversation?
We are going to wait and see if speech improves.	How long will you wait? A week, a month, a year? What about all the language learning and experience that he/she will miss?
We don't want her to rely on the computer and not learn speech.	How will she communicate while you are working on speech?

The question we have to ask is, "Would you consider any of the statements we posed at the beginning to be FUNCTIONAL COMMUNICATION?" It may be functional to communication partners who are familiar with the individual or the situation, but what about for those who are not? What about learning and developing language? We need to look more closely at the benefits as well as costs to individuals with communication impairments, who have "some speech" and how AAC might enhance their overall communication interaction and language development.

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Benefits and Costs

There are definitely some benefits to using context and familiarity. The communication partners may be able to correctly interpret a single word or hard-to-understand sentence correctly because of their familiarity with the speaker or knowledge of the situation. However, there may also be costs as the success of the interaction is based on the assumption that these partners will always accurately interpret the message or will always be available.

Let's look at a few scenarios that may be successful in certain situations with a familiar partner, but how that might change in another scenario:

Benefit of a communication partner who is familiar to the speaker or context of the situation	Potential Costs:
John looks out of the window and says, "car." His teacher responds, "Your mom will be here at 3:30. We need to keep working."	• What if he wanted to point out a car that he saw out the window? • What if he wanted to know if it was time to go but a substitute teacher was there for the day?
Carol and her husband are in the grocery store. Carol points to the women's magazines at the checkout. Her husband says, "Oh, that's right. We need to get the TV schedule."	• What if Carol was pointing out something interesting in one of the magazines? • What if she wanted to buy one of the magazines? • What if her son was with her rather than her husband and instead of coming home with a TV schedule, they arrived home with a tabloid?
Chris enters the room and produces a story in which the word, "daw" is produced several times. Her mother or therapist knows that "daw" is "dog" and asks Chris yes and no questions to figure out the rest of the story.	• What if Chris's mother or therapist don't ask the right yes/no questions to figure out what Chris is trying to communicate? • What if Chris used the word "daw" with someone other than her mother or therapist and that person thought Chris was talking about a "duck" or a "dock"? • How would Chris make friends or participate in school with limited vocabulary?

Think About It:
- How do you feel when someone finishes your sentence but does it incorrectly?
- How do you feel when someone assumes they know what you want, think or feel?
- How would you like to interact with the same one or two people?
- What would it be like to be able to produce only a few words or sentences that people could understand?
- What would it be like if you were able to communicate by repeating the last word(s) said by others or by producing lines from movies or television shows?

The cost of relying on familiarity and context is that it assumes that you, as the communication partner, always know what someone else is going to say. It assumes that an individual will always say the same thing in a given situation or that you will always be there to interpret accurately. This is certainly not a helpful assumption in any relationship. It does not allow for or encourage growth and independence in an individual's communication skills and interests. It also limits the individual's ability to communicate outside the circle of those who are familiar and knowledgeable. The person with severe communication impairment cannot effectively establish or deepen relationships with others or demonstrate new knowledge or thoughts (Light, Collier, & Parnes, 1985; National Research Council, 2001). Use of AAC as part of an overall communication system can assist in avoiding these costs.

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What Role Can AAC Play?

AAC can assist in avoiding costs as it becomes a part of the overall communication system that includes speech, gestures, signs, pointing, facial expression, body language and natural speech.

Let us consider the role AAC can play in the life of an individual with severe communication impairment. AAC provides a means of:

- Communicating more understandably
- Expressing the exacting message one wishes to produce
- Interacting with less familiar people
- Sharing messages that are "outside the norm" for a particular routine
- Communicating with greater independence
- Being seen by others as being a more competent communicator
- Participating in longer and deeper interactions
- Expanding language and communication skills

Let's take another look at the previous scenarios and see what might happen if each used AAC including a communication device as part of their overall system.

Message dependent upon familiarity of partner or context	Intended message or variations of message using a communication device as part of the overall AAC system
John looks out of the window and says, "car." His teacher responds, "Your mom will be here at 3:30. We need to keep working."	**John** looks out the window and says, "car" and produces "look" with his communication device. His teacher looks out the window and says, "Yes, that is a fancy car."
Carol and her husband are in the grocery store. Carol points to the women's magazines at the checkout. Her husband says, "Oh, that's right. We need to get the TV schedule."	**Carol** says "That is too bad." with her SGD while pointing at the magazine to her husband. The cashier adds a comment, "Can you believe that?"
Chris enters the room and produces a story in which the word, "daw" is produced several times. Her mother or therapist knows that "daw" is "dog" and asks Chris yes and no questions to figure out the rest of the story.	**Chris** uses her SGD to tell her mother or therapist what happened with the dog. It turns out to be something her mother or therapist would never have guessed. In addition, Chris is able to tell the story to her grandmother on the phone, to her neighbor, her friend and the sales person at the store.

In each of these scenarios, the use of AAC provided a way for these individuals to expand the depth of their interaction as well as their independence. We do not know how much the speech of these individuals will improve and whether it will be functional enough to meet their communication needs. We do know that AAC can play an important role for these individuals to leverage language and communication skills that already exist as well as develop additional language and communication skills. AAC can encourage participation and independence in all environments and with a variety of communication partners.

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