



AAC Myths Revealed

Myth:

A child can be too young for AAC.

True or False:

False

This myth may be perpetuated based on a number of presumptions, including two that are very common:

- Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) will keep children from talking.
- Certain skills are needed before AAC can be introduced. (Bailey, 2006, Ronski & Sevcik, 2005, Cress & Marvin, 2003)

Impact of AAC: Research tells us that AAC can positively impact speech production (Cress, et al., 2003). In fact DeThorne (2009) cited AAC as an evidence-based technique for the purpose of facilitating speech production in children who are not imitating speech.

AAC also has been found to positively impact children's language, cognition, and literacy skills. With AAC, children's participation in developmentally important social, educational and play environments increase as well (Branson & Demchak, 2009).

Similar findings were summarized in 2007 by the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, are long-reaching benefits of AAC interventions for young children are positive. They 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 3 years of life lay the foundation for later brain development.

The Cost of Waiting: Communication and language development impact advancement of many other skills (e.g., cognition, literacy, play, social interaction). AAC has an enormous potential to expand skills necessary in our everyday lives. Ronski & Sevcik (2005) remind us that the use of AAC interventions should not be contingent on the failure to develop speech skills, or considered as a last resort. AAC can play many rolls in early communication development.

Prerequisites to Introducing AAC

The idea of prerequisites for introducing AAC is likely based on two presumptions:

- Certain cognitive skills precede language.
- Communication must be independent.

Given the interplay between language and cognition, there are those who believe that a child must have certain cognitive skills before he/she can benefit from augmentative communication. Some of these cognitive skills include causality or cause/effect (understanding that one event is a consequence of another), means-end (planning steps to reach a goal), object permanence (objects continue to exist even if they are out of sight and cannot be perceived by hearing or touch) and others.

Kangas & Lloyd (1988) reviewed a variety of early language studies and found:

- Cognitive development and the emergence of speech and language are related.
- Their relationship, however, is not causal (i.e., cognitive development did not lead to the emergence of speech).
- At times, language skills appeared before the expected cognitive skills had been developed.

These statements alone cast considerable doubt on our choice to withhold or delay provision of AAC on the basis that certain cognitive skills must appear first. Kangas & Lloyd continue by noting that "communication experience can also be a vehicle for expanding cognitive skills."

Beukelman and Mirenda (2005) state that a "not ready for" criteria were used as a result of misguided interpretation of literature examining communication and language development. They believe that the use of an inclusive model ensure that communication needs of each child will be met regardless of their age. The inclusive model casts considerable doubt on the choice to withhold or delay provision of AAC on the basis that certain cognitive skills must appear first or that we should wait and see if speech develops.

However, this is not the only reason why delay or withholding of AAC might occur. It may also take place when one believes that communication must be an independent act (completed without assistance). This view ignores the fact that none of us communicates independently (Cress & Marvin, 2003). Even the most fluent speaker or augmented communicator, needs to be prompted to recall a word occasionally, is asked questions to clarify a statement or is cued to remember a detail. Communication does not happen in a vacuum. We rely on others to collaborate with us to establish meaning (co-construction) and to provide assistance/support when needed. This is especially true for young children (Cress & Marvin, 2003).

Where do we Begin?

So, how do we begin to pursue AAC for a young child? It is a decision based on communication needs. The Communication Needs Model (Beukelman & Mirenda, 2005) suggests that AAC interventions should be provided based on an individual's communication needs. For example, one child's AAC program may include unaided AAC supports, such as pointing to items they need, gestures to communication wants, and vocalizations to gain attention. While another child's AAC communication program may include a combination of Low tech and high tech AAC tools and techniques that may include developing vocalizations to gain attention, pointing to picture symbols for choice making, using a speech output device for social development, and classroom curriculum participation.

AAC is not limited to just one mode of communication, but takes advantage of low tech, lite tech, and high tech strategies. Early access to AAC methods can assist a child in using their behavioral interactions to further develop intentional communication. By making these behaviors

more recognizable or understandable to his or her caregiver, teacher, or therapist, they in turn can respond to and reinforce those early communication behaviors that lead to further development. And, as we consider AAC for young children intervention should target multiple modes of communication. Their communication toolkit should include support of their vocalization and gestures, as well as development of a low-tech symbol system. Additionally high-tech systems should be considered to support the focus on development of more independent communication.

It's important to remember that 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.

Reality of AAC for Young Children

The reality of AAC for young children is that there are no prerequisites for communication when using AAC supports. As we consider AAC for young children, Drager et. al. (2004) suggests: *Intervention should target multiple modes of communication, such as vocalizations, gestures, and low technology systems (e.g., boards or books) that impose fewer learning demands, as well as a focus on appropriate instruction for [high tech] AAC technologies.*

With this in mind, can AAC be introduced too early? We don't believe so, and below are the realities we have discovered as we reviewed numerous research articles on this topic.

- Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) does not keep children from talking but has a positive effect on speech production (Cress et. al., 2003).
- AAC is not limited to multi-page communication books and speech generating devices but includes a variety of tools and techniques including unaided, light technology and high technology.
- There are no prerequisites for communication including AAC (Kangas & Lloyd, 1988, Ronski & Sevcik, 2005).
- AAC should not be eliminated or delayed based on issues specific to this age group. Rather, consideration must be given to these issues so that we identify ways to address them or overcome them.

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