

Aphasia and Communication: Ideas for Therapy and Everyday Use



Communication Partner Techniques for Supporting Individuals with Aphasia

We all benefit when our communication partners are supportive . . . asking questions, providing words when we can't think of them, or prompting us to provide more detail. Individuals with aphasia experience language issues that make this type support essential. The success of a communication interaction is not the sole responsibility of the person with aphasia. The communication partner is equally responsible for successful interactions. Use the three tips listed below to better support communication and independence for individuals with aphasia.

👉 **Helpful Hint:** These tips are appropriate for any person with speech and language difficulties (e.g., cerebral palsy, traumatic brain injury, etc.).

Tip 1: Be Patient and Decrease Distractions

Allow time for the person with aphasia to respond. The individual may need time to process and express what they want to say. In addition, a quiet environment with less distractions can increase focus and understanding.

Tip 2: Create a Positive Communication Environment

Our attitude, the comments that we make, and the way we respond to communication attempts from adults with aphasia can have positively or negatively affect communication success. A positive communication environment encourages successful interaction through the attitudes and actions of the communication partner.

A positive communication environment is:

- **a place or situation** (e.g., home, restaurant, talking on the phone, car, etc.)
- **where all types of communication are encouraged** (e.g., pointing, sign language, speech, AAC device, body language, facial expressions, etc.)
- **help is provided when communication becomes difficult** (e.g., appropriate cueing, partner-augmented input, wait time, drawing a picture, etc.).



In a positive communication environment, we spend minimal time on things that are difficult. When difficulties occur, we create an action plan to address them. When we focus on positive results, the AAC user can:

- Be more independent.
- Create more and better communication messages.
- Build deeper relationships and regain their former social roles as much as possible.

Tip 3: Slow Down your Speaking Rate

By slowing down your rate of speech and using short sentences, you can help increase understanding for the person with aphasia. In addition, use gestures and pointing to add to your messages. For example, if you are having a conversation about baking cookies, point to kitchen utensils, ingredients, and recipes during the interaction.

Tip 4: Support Communication by Demonstrating Appropriate AAC Use

Demonstrate AAC use to show individuals with aphasia how to use the system during everyday activities, and functional communication should follow. Encourage (but do not require) the individual with aphasia to use the device during these interactions. Communication partners should use the device by pointing to the symbols and words on the device while simultaneously talking. Keep in mind that the communication partner must know where the vocabulary is located on the device to provide partner-augmented input during interaction. By demonstrating the use of the device, the communication partner can:

- Increase comprehension (Drager et al., 2006).
- Provide models for appropriate communication (Calfiero, 1998).
- Increase production of multi-symbol/word messages (Binger and Light, 2007).
- Improve utterance length and complexity (Bruno and Trembath, 2006).

It might feel uncomfortable to use the device at first, but with practice, it will begin to feel more natural and you will be well on your way to better supporting your client or loved one during communication interactions.

Tip 5: Use Written Choice Strategy

Written choice requires the communication partner to give two or more choices to the person with aphasia, verbally saying the choices as you write them down. One of the options might be “a different choice” to offer flexibly to the interaction, allowing the person with aphasia to choose. For example, I might ask “What would you like for dinner?” The options are chicken, lasagna, pizza, and “a different choice.” I write these options down as I verbally read them and ask the person to point to their answer. Even if the person with aphasia cannot read, they should remember what the choices are and be able to respond.