

Myth:

Some Speech or Basic Needs is Enough

Communicating with AAC

Individuals who use an augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) system will use a combination of methods to relay a message that varies depending on the situation and/or the communication partner. Their AAC system may include a communication device, communication board/book, or non-verbal communication such as:

- Body language (tensing to indicate frustration, sagging shoulders to indicate disappointment)
- Pointing (indicates specific objects, people, or places in the environment as well as directions)
- Gestures (patting one's stomach to show hunger, touching one's head to indicate a headache)
- Facial expression (frowning to indicate sadness, smiling to indicate pleasure)
- And for some, vocalizations or even natural speech.

Using AAC with Speech

Many AAC users may have some speech, but it is important to ask the following questions:

- Is their speech functional enough to participate in activities of daily life?
- Does their speech enable them to learn and develop language and literacy skills?

Let's consider this from two perspectives – a child with autism who is developing language and an adult with aphasia who is essentially re-learning language.



Evan is a boy with autism. He is in third grade and is integrated into a regular classroom for most of the day. He uses his limited speech, some gestures, and pointing to make his basic needs known. When these methods are not successful, he will grab someone's arm and take them to what he wants. He also interjects with repeated sentences from his favorite TV show or may repeat a word, phrase, or sentence that another person says.

Do Evan's current speech abilities enable him to learn and develop language and literacy skills? Is his speech functional enough to participate in activities of daily life?

Currently, he has difficulty expressing what he wants with his speech. He has difficulty in social interactions being unable to share funny stories or information about himself. He is able to answer yes/no questions but has difficulty if asked a choice or wh- question, and he often has limited participation in academic activities. As he gets older, we expect that he will become more independent in taking care of his basic needs, but we do not know when or if his speech, gestures, and pointing will meet his social needs.

Using AAC with Speech



Tania is a woman with aphasia, a language disorder resulting from a neurological event. She is able to make herself coffee, get food, use the restroom, and get a blanket if she is cold. She is able to dress herself and physically take care of her daily needs, as well as those of her family.

However, due to her aphasia, she has difficulty finding the words she wants to say. Her messages are mostly “telegraphic” in nature. For example, she might say “Store... today” and then point to the refrigerator. She will also try to draw or write a few letters to help relay her message.

Is Tania’s speech functional enough to participate in activities of daily life?

Tania has two teenage daughters with a husband of 25 years. With her current speech capabilities, she has difficulty telling people what she wants, expressing her feelings, sharing stories about her life, asking questions, indicating her opinion, and participating in typical adult activities (e.g., banking, ordering at a restaurant, shopping).

Using speech alone, both Tania and Evan will struggle to communicate in ways such as sharing stories, offering opinions, interacting socially with peers, and/or developing higher level language and literacy skills. AAC can benefit both Tania and Evan to communicate beyond basic needs!

The Purpose of Communication - Beyond Basic Needs

Meeting our basic needs is, by definition, vital to our ongoing physical well-being, whether they are met independently (e.g., fixing yourself a sandwich, going to the bathroom) or by communicating a need for others to meet (e.g., asking for a snack, asking for assistance to use the restroom). When basic needs go unmet, the results may include illness, injury, pain, abuse, neglect, medical intervention, hospitalization, and possibly death. In no way do we wish to diminish the importance of ensuring that individuals are able to meet these needs on their own or by expressing them to others.

Expression of basic needs, however, is not the only reason we communicate. Think about the last conversation you had on the phone with a friend or at dinner time with your family. Were you just relaying basic needs or were you sharing news about your school or work day? Or maybe you were talking about a summer vacation trip, the latest blockbuster movie, or even how you get frustrated with the morning traffic. In fact, Light (1996) proposes four purposes of communication:

- **Wants and Needs**—Includes basic needs as we have defined them above as well as individual wants (e.g., television, music, hug, more of an activity, break).
- **Information Transfer**—Sharing information (e.g., how to change a tire, directions to one’s home, answering questions in school, directions to a co-worker or caregiver).
- **Social Etiquette**—Socially-accepted greetings, closings, and polite words and phrases (e.g., thank you, please, you’re welcome).
- **Social Closeness**—Messages that facilitate initiation, maintenance, and deepening of social relationships (e.g., stories, asking questions, compliments, feedback).

So much more than basic needs! If you are a parent, student, co-worker, or employer, you may say that “information transfer” makes up much of your communication, directing others or sharing information. Communication with family members and friends is often for the purpose of social closeness—deepening our relationships. When we are in a public place, social etiquette plays a major role in our interactions. Expressing wants and needs is certainly a part of what we share with each other but it is not ALL that we communicate, nor is it all that those with complex communication needs desire to communicate.

How can AAC help?

As mentioned at the beginning, AAC is just one part of an individual's overall communication system that may include a communication device, gestures, pointing, drawing, and even natural speech.

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.

No evidence demonstrates that using AAC will keep someone from using or developing natural speech. Thus, AAC can help to provide the same communication opportunities for individuals for whom natural speech alone may be limited or limiting. It allows individuals to establish connections with others. It provides them with a way to control their environment, develop language, and literacy skills, improves respect from communication partners, and increases communicative opportunities such as in these scenarios:

- Jenny was able to use her programmed messages about her weekend to share the exciting events during her camping trip with her family to her class. She also showed them pictures on her device.
- Mrs. Smith had guests who called to say they were stopping by on their way through town. She used her device, writing, and natural speech to let her husband know.
- Andrew knew the answer to a question in his science class, he raised his hand and answered using his communication device.
- Bob's sister lived out of state; using his device, he could call her to continue their weekly conversations.
- During free time, Evan was able to use his device to initiate making a fort with his classmates.
- Tania was able to participate in the quarterly conferences with her daughter's teachers at school.

AAC can encourage participation and independence in all environments and with a variety of communication partners.

References

Light, J. (1996). Communication is the essence of human life. *Augmentative and Alternative Communication*, 13, 61-70.