

## Myth:

### Too Young to 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!

#### AAC and 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 introduction of AAC correlates with the improvement of natural speech, even in situations in which no speech therapy has been given (Ballinger, n.d.).

#### AAC Prerequisites

Some people believe that a child needs to have specific skills to use AAC. For example, they may believe that a child needs to have certain cognitive (thinking) 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 reviewed a variety of early language studies and found that cognitive development and speech and language development are interrelated but not causal. For example, cognitive development does not lead to speech development or vice versa. In fact they note that in fact "communication can also be a vehicle for expanding cognitive skills." (Kangas & Lloyd 1988)

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" (e.g., communication) (Cress, 2006).

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#### Independent Communication and AAC

Another reason people may delay or withhold AAC is 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. They are also asked questions to clarify a statement or are cued to remember a detail. Communication does not happen in a vacuum. We rely on others to interact with us to establish meaning (co-construction) and to provide assistance/support when needed (Cress & Marvin, 2003). This is especially true for young children. Doesn't it seem backward put off trying AAC until someone appears to communicate without assistance? Using AAC will help young children learn to communicate more independently.

## The Cost of Waiting



AAC positively impacts independent communication, 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.

Similar findings were summarized by the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child that the long-term 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 three years of life lay the foundation for later brain development (2007).

## Where Do We Begin?

Let's start by looking at AAC as an intervention approach that uses multiple modes of communication, including gestures, communication devices/boards/books, and natural speech, that can "incorporate a child's full communication abilities" (Romski & Sevcik, 2005). AAC may play any of the following roles: augmenting (supporting) a child's natural speech, being the primary way a child communicates, being a system that helps a child to both understand (input) language spoken to them AND their communication mode (output), and/or serve as part of a language intervention strategy. AAC provides a child with the ability to use any of these modes to learn language and communicate their ideas.

It's important to remember that AAC intervention is a decision based on communication needs, and that needs 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.

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