Augmentative and Alternative Communication

The field of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) is broad with many applications appropriate for students with autism. Language disorder is a defining characteristic of autism, and some students with autism may not develop functional use of speech. Many students with autism may develop a “gestalt” language style where chunks of communication are stored and reproduced with little analysis in regard to structure. The processing of transient information such as speech is difficult for individuals with autism, while processing of visual information may be a relative strength. Because students with autism present so differently from other students who may be using AAC (i.e., students with physical and motor limitations), special consideration is given as AAC systems are planned.

“Communication system” is an important term. As we plan to support students with AAC, we provide a variety of output choices (e.g., pictures, signs, objects, technology) that build on whatever naturally occurring communication is useful. Augmentation of communication means supplementing interaction that occurs naturally. This may change over time as circumstances pose differing demands on the child. Alternative communication may be developed for use instead of speech. Sometimes families and others worry that providing a student with a communication system will delay or interrupt speech development. We now know that when students learn the power of communication through whatever means, speech development is enhanced. This resource briefly reviews information that specifically targets AAC use for students with autism.

Just Do It!

Putting together a communication system can be overwhelming. You need information about how the student is already using language. You need to know what level of symbol representation a student can interpret (e.g., pictures, miniature objects, real objects, photographs, written words). You need information on when, where, and with whom the system will be used. A thorough assessment is important, but when it comes to providing communication, a long wait won’t do. As Lillian Stiegler said at the Autism Society of America’s 1999 convention, Urgent Matters: Opening Lines of Communication for Young Children, “Everyone needs the ability to communicate today, right now, at this very moment. It’s an emergency! It’s a life-support system, like breathing air or eating food.” Start somewhere. Just do it!

Environmentally Specific Displays

You don’t need to have a display or system available for every circumstance initially. Find a few places where the need to communicate exists. It might be a play area or a book corner. Create a display with vocabulary specific to that particular setting, and leave it in the setting. These displays can grow as the need grows. Provide generic vocabulary in a portable carry-around mode as a student moves from place to place. Cafiero (1998) provides excellent instructions for creating environmentally specific boards. Two other good sources for this topic are Goossens’ Communication Displays for Engineered Preschool Environments: Book 1 and Quick and Easy Ideas for Using Classroom Materials to Teach Academics to Nonverbal Children and More!, both of which are available from CISE’s library.

Working with Students with Autism in the Schools
**Natural Aided Language**

Students with autism have both receptive and expressive language difficulties. Natural aided language is a simple, powerful technique that allows the communicative partner and the student to use the system together. The communication display constitutes a visual language and is used by both speaker and listener. Comprehension and expression are both encouraged and taught. The partner might point to pictures on the display as instructions for an activity are given, while the student might then use the same display to ask for clarification. Interaction includes mutual use of the display in the communication exchange (Cafiero, 1998).

**Behaviors and Communication**

If a student doesn’t have the communicative skills to get needs met and wants fulfilled, the student is likely to use challenging behavior to that end. When we see students for whom challenging behaviors are problems, a first course of action should be to look at the child’s communication. Is it working? If the words are not there and the AAC system is not in place and functional, then that is where you start. Look at why the behavior is occurring. Is the student tired? Does the student need a break? If so, teach the student a way (e.g., with work, a sign, a picture) to tell you that. Augment the child’s communication system so there is an easy and efficient way to tell you. The point is behaviors are messages. Your job as a person who supports students with communication difficulties is to help students find an appropriate way to get their messages across.

**Literacy and AAC**

Students who have communication difficulties, including students with autism, will almost certainly have impoverished pre-literacy and literacy experiences unless provided assistance. When you think about what happens before and during early reading, you envision students playing with books, commenting on pictures, asking for the same story over and over, and interacting with another person about the book. These same things need to happen for students with autism. You can make that happen by adapting reading material with manipulatives and visuals. Provide environmentally engineered displays to accompany book reading activities. Take advantage of technology and look for interactive books online and in software packages. A terrific resource on literacy and AAC is *Emergent Literacy Success: Merging Technology and Whole Language for Students with Disabilities* by Caroline Ramsey Mussel-white and Pati King-DeBaun, which is available from Creative Communicating, P.O. Box 3358, Park City, UT 84060 or www.creative-comm.com.

**Low Tech, No Tech, or High Tech?**

There are some elaborate communication devices for sale now—very sophisticated computers with digital voice, layered vocabulary, and potential for thousands of words.

While it is tempting to look to the high end when wanting to support students, you’re probably better off starting with displays on the lower end of the technology continuum. Use of some of the high tech devices requires students to categorize or associate one picture with multiple meanings. Some require accessing several pictures in a certain order to retrieve vocabulary. This may be overwhelming to some students. Additionally, when you think about functional communication training and providing alternative communication for challenging behaviors, you want to teach communication skills that
are as easy and efficient as the challenging behavior. Some displays do not fit that criterion. If the device is more difficult to use, it is likely the student will stay with the more efficient behavior.

References


