

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)

The term *augmentative* means to supplement or enhance. Individuals who use augmentative communication are adding a gesture, picture symbol, or other mode of expression to their speech. For example, individuals who have difficulty articulating due to neurological and muscle impairments may have speech that is slow, weak, uncoordinated, and unintelligible. People who are already familiar with these individuals may be able to understand their speech; however, people who are not familiar with these individuals might benefit if an additional mode of communication were used. Without the aid of technology, individuals who are unable to effectively communicate are frequently frustrated and have difficulty demonstrating what they know and can do.

The term *alternative* means substitute or different. An alternative communication system can include multiple methods of expressing information. If a student is completely nonverbal, the student might exclusively use gestures, pictures, and vocalizations to demonstrate what he or she knows.

Technology can create independence. Your knowledge about various types of communication and how to support students who communicate differently will change the course of their learning.

Types of AAC

Communication typically happens with two or more people talking to one another. Their voices do not convey all of the information they share because communication is a system that is interdependent on a variety of elements to make it whole. AAC can be as low-tech as a gesture or sign language, and as high-tech as a computer that speaks words, phrases, sentences, and more:

- Sign language
- Gestures, facial expressions, body language, vocalizations, use of objects
- Picture symbols, drawings, photos
- Printed text
- Text-based communication devices
- Static or fixed communication devices
- Dynamic display communication devices

Students who use AAC devices access their systems in a variety of ways:

- Pointing: students use a finger or a low-tech head or mouth-pointing device to make their communication selections.
- Exchange: students choose a symbol, icon, photo, or text containing the information they wish to convey and present it to a communicative partner. The partner's response will vary. For instance the partner might respond verbally, point to something, or present the student with a physical object.
- Simple eye-gaze: students glance at a picture, symbol, letter, word, phrase, or sentence and the communicative partner will generally verbalize the student's selections for confirmation.

