



HELPING YOUR CHILD COMMUNICATE WITH AAC

(Augmentative and Alternative Communication)

PARTNER STRATEGIES BOOKLET

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An important predictor of success in learning to use AAC systems is having good communication partners

Being a Good Communication Partner:

What does it mean?

- ✓ Believing in Fundamental AAC and Child Learning Principles:
 - Communication is multi-modal: gestures, body language, pictures, sounds and word approximations, manual signs etc. Everything counts.
 - Communication is not a chore, work or activity. It happens all the time in natural contexts
 - Children with complex communication needs learn best during fun, meaningful, engaging interactions
 - Children with complex communication needs may need help to stay calmly focused and alert so they are neurologically available to learn during the communication interaction
 - All children can learn something. There's always room for growth

- ✓ Being a Good Communication Partner also requires (*see handouts*):
 1. Having the communication device always available to the child
 2. Reading and responding appropriately to the child's non-verbal signals
 3. Modeling communication with pictures (Aided Language)
 4. Prompting picture communication in meaningful, functional situations
 - Creating opportunities
 - Encouraging communication beyond requests
 - Prompting appropriately
 5. Creating a plan for Modeling and Prompting

Having the Communication Device Always Available

Just as we can't take away a child's voice, we don't take away a child's AAC device. Children should always have access to their devices to participate in any communication opportunity that comes their way. When verbal children speak out of turn, we give them verbal feedback to remind them that it's not their turn to speak. It's very important to do the same with children who use AAC devices - give them the feedback about when it's appropriate to talk and when it's not appropriate to talk rather than take their device away.

We want to make sure the device is with them and functioning at all times:

HOW?

1. Plan how the child will carry their device or have access to it in all situations and locations
2. Discuss what are the possible hurdles to the child carrying his device wherever they go
3. Create a plan on how to tackle the hurdles (e.g. have a laminated back-up system, an adult carrying the device, etc...)

WHERE?

A) Indoors:

How will the child access their device independently or always have their device with them?

Solution:

B) Outdoors:

Who will carry the child's device?

Solution:

If we or the child carry the child's device at least 90% of the day, communication opportunities will likely not be missed.

Reading and Responding to Non-Verbal Signals

- Children with complex communication needs may use gestures, physical actions, body language, sounds and other signals to express their wants, needs and thoughts. **Being alert to these signals and responding appropriately is essential to learning AAC.**

- **If the child uses a clear, acceptable gesture you don't need to prompt them to use the device. However, you can take advantage of the opportunity to MODEL communication with the device.** Modeling picture communication is called *Aided Language*. It means demonstrating how to use pictures to communicate things. For example: The child taps the seat of a chair next to him while smiling at you, inviting you to sit by his side. You acknowledge his message -- "Ah, you're telling me to SIT next to you" . You sit next to the child and then you point at the picture of SIT or COME HERE on the device. This sends the child the message that his way of communicating (tapping the seat) was understood and acknowledged, while exposing him to picture communication.

- **BE SUBTLE! Make sure the child does not perceive your modeling of his non-verbal signals as an indirect attempt to correct them.** To prevent this from happening, use pictures in many other situations or contexts. For example:
 - To make comments: e.g., the child seems to be enjoying eating his snack you say: "I see you LIKE your APPLESAUCE"
 - To greet e.g., the child looks and smiles as the teacher enters the classroom, you say: "Mr. White is here, HI + Mr. WHITE"
 - To label things in the child environment: e.g., the child notices a squirrel and vocalizes, you say: "It's a SQUIREL".

- **You don't have to honour each non-verbal signal, but you have to ACKNOWLEDGE them and, whenever possible, model or provide feedback using pictures.** For example, the child pushes his shoes away when you ask him to get ready to get on the bus. You say: "I see you don't want to put your shoes on" --while you point to NO + SHOES on the device-- "It's time to put shoes on to go home" --while pointing to GO + HOME

Aided Language Input:

Modeling Communication with Pictures

The Basics

- We start teaching the child to use their AAC device by **demonstrating communication with pictures**. This is called "Aided Language Input". Aided Language means using pictures when talking to the child.
- The child will be a passive observer while you (i.e. communication partner) **point at pictures** pairing what you say, as you speak. The child is expected to **look** at the pictures as you point at them
- Pair the **key word/s** of what you say with its picture e.g., You say: "*It's time to go outside*" while pointing and showing to the child the picture of *GO* and/or *OUTSIDE*
- Whenever the child indicates something nonverbally, for example pulling your hand and guiding you towards an item out of his reach; **acknowledge his signal** (e.g., tell him "*You want something*") and show him the picture that communicates that intent e.g., say "*Do you need help?*" as you point at the picture of *HELP*
- Talk and point at pictures that show what the child is **hearing, seeing, doing and expressing with body language** e.g. if you can tell the child is enjoying reading/looking at a book, you point at the picture of *LIKE + BOOK* while saying "*I see you like this book*"
- Emphasis should be placed on establishing an **enjoyable shared interaction**, no quizzing or testing
- Eventually, the child may start pointing at pictures to tell you things; praise him! and continue using aided language to expand the message. For example, if the child points at the picture of *MOVIE*, you **acknowledge and EXPAND his message** into a two-word sequence e.g., point at *WATCH + MOVIE* while saying "*Do you want to watch a movie?... I'd like that too*" Increase the amount of pictures you model gradually as the child demonstrates increased attention to pictures being shown. Do not ask him to expand his messages! just acknowledge and SHOW him longer messages
- The main purpose of Aided Language is to MODEL or provide examples to the child of how to communicate using pictures. This strategy may *also* help the child understand language better but comprehension is not the reason why we model. **Immersion** in picture communication is.

Aided Language Input:

Am I Doing It Right?

Aided Language seems like a simple concept: Partners should model or demonstrate picture communication when talking to children who are learning to use picture communication, so that they would learn by example. Yet, when it comes to implementation we see frequent misinterpretations. The most commons being:

- Using pictures only to give directives (e.g., "Let's go to the gym", "Get ready to eat", "Pick a colour")... Remember, we are using pictures to talk to the child so that they learn how to use them to tell us things that they want to say, things that matter to them. Pay close attention to the child, and model messages that you know the child would find **interesting, useful or meaningful**. Make sure you provide models of **multiple communicative functions** and purposes such as:
 - Sharing information: "I heard you went to see Spider Man on the weekend"
 - Making comments: "That's awesome!"
 - Asking questions: "What is your favourite colour?"
 - Greeting: "Hi! I'm happy to see you today!"
- Missing valuable opportunities to show the child how to communicate with pictures by, either failing to match his non-verbal signals with pictures, or by failing to read the child's non-verbal signals altogether. Look for what the child communicates with body language and gestures and **match those with pictures**.
- Modeling only few times per day. Learning to communicate with pictures require **lots and lots of exposure** to picture communication. It's equivalent to learning a second language. Showing pictures only few times per day or only for limited activities doesn't really lead to meaningful gains.
- Adults not taking enough time to learn the system. Communication partners need to learn to navigate the communication system to find relatively quickly the words/pictures they want to model. Partners are not expected to be fully proficient and know how to find all the words from the get go but only **to know the location of the words that will be modeled**. Partners can learn this by freely exploring words and pictures with the child.
- Not expanding the child's message after he uses pictures to tell us something. Remember, if we want to take the child's expressive skills to the next level, we need to **add one or two missing elements** when we repeat his messages back to him.

Aided Language Input:

Practical examples

The chart below shows examples of messages that can be Modeled with picture communication during daily routines. The only expectation is for the child to attend when the partner models

ACTIVITY	OPPORTUNITY	COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTION MODELED
Mealtime	Dad sees Matt reaching up for the cupboard or his lunch bag. Dad says "I see you want something to eat" while pointing to the pictures of WANT + EAT on the device	REQUESTING (asking for food)
	Matt takes a bite of his food during lunch. He makes a face then pulls it out of his mouth. Mom asks: "What happened?" Matt hands the bite of food to her. She holds the device in front of him, opens the food page and says "too hot" while pointing at the picture of HOT	COMMENTING (describing an event)
	It's time to eat. Matt is on the computer watching YouTube videos. His brother approaches Matt and shows him the pictures of COME + EAT on the device while telling him "Come over, time to eat"	DIRECTING SOMEONE'S ACTIONS
Reading Time	EA brings one book to read with Matt, shows him READ. Matt smiles and taps the pirate on the cover of the book. EA says; "I see... you like pirates" while pointing to LIKE + PIRATES	COMMENTING (describing an event)
	Matt looks attentively at a page showing a big whale. Teacher says: "That's a big blue whale" while showing WHALE + BIG	COMMENTING (describing an event)
In the Classroom	Liam, Matt's peer is playing with cars. Matt joins him and grabs a car from Liam's hand. Liam starts whining. Teacher asks Matt to return the car to Liam, she shows him I'M SORRY	EXPRESSES MANNERS (apologizing)
	Matt is looking out the window, he is looking at squirrels going up and down a tree. EA joins him. Matt is giggling. Teacher asks from her desk: "What's so funny?" EA opens the Animals page and says SQUIRREL	ANSWERING A QUESTION (sharing information)
Transitioning	Mom and Matt get to the doctor's office parking lot. Matt starts whining. Mom knows he doesn't want to go inside. Mom brings the device and says DOCTOR now, then PARK	NEGOTIATING (requesting change of activity)
	Matt goes to the main office to get the attendance binder. The receptionist says: "Hi Matt". Matt gets the binder without responding. His EA holds out his device while showing him HI	GREETING (responding Hi to an unfamiliar partner)
	Mom says: "Matt, time for bed" while showing BEDTIME on the device. Matt frowns and pushes the device away. Mom points to NO + BEDTIME and tells Matt; "Oh, you're telling me 'No bedtime'"	PROTESTING (saying 'no')

Aided Language Input:

Where Do I Start?

1. Comment on things happening in the child's immediate environment -e.g., events the child is attending to

"MOM is here"



"I smell POPCORN"

2. Interpret what the child is expressing non-verbally -e.g., gestures, facial expressions

Child is reaching for the juice jar:

"I see you want JUICE"



Child smiles when hearing Paw Patrol's music: "You like PAW PATROL"



3. Redirect the child -e.g., announce transitions, give instructions

"Time to go HOME"



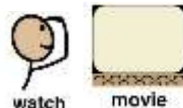
"Put your SHOES on"



4. Increase amount of pictures gradually by adding one more word at the time

Child sits in front of TV, partner says

"You want to WATCH a MOVIE?"



Prompting Picture Communication:

Creating Meaningful Opportunities

- MODELING is different than PROMPTING. When you model, the child is not expected to touch the device, just watch you. When you prompt, you are encouraging the child to use the device.
- The best opportunities for prompting occur **in the child's daily routines** at home, school etc
- When creating and choosing opportunities to actively prompt children to start communicating with their AAC systems, consider following the **3F rule** i.e., choose situations and messages with the following 3 elements:
 - **FUN:** motivating and with a clear pay-off for the child. This should include actions beyond asking for highly desired or motivating things such as preferred food, toys and activities. It should include activities that bring some level of gratification to the child. For example playing turn taking games with familiar people, getting help to obtain a desired result, directing people to do things he likes or wants, commenting on things that are interesting or motivating.
 - **FUNCTIONAL:** useful, referring to things that the child cannot communicate efficiently with gestures or word approximations alone. For example, teaching the child to communicate "want + movie" may not be functional for a child if he can tell you this by pointing at the DVD player. Teaching "want + Shrek" may be more valuable for the child if he has no easier or faster way of telling you the name of the movie he wants to watch.
 - **FAST:** that can be expressed in a quick, efficient manner. if you or the child have to spend too long searching for the word to express a desired meaning, it is very likely that by the time you find the right picture, the communication moment is gone and the child has moved on to something else.
- Communication partners need to **set up the environment** to ensure that the child using AAC has plenty of opportunities to be in control and make choices Some ideas:
 - Engage in a fun play routine several times, then pause and wait for the child to re-initiate the routine For example, blowing bubbles, tickles or swings, motor games and songs
 - Set up obstacles to desired objects or activities. For example, place desired things out of reach but in view, use containers that the child cannot open independently, give toys with mechanism that the child cannot operate on his own
 - Set up problem-solving situations For example, leave out pieces of a puzzle or other motivating toy/game, put in extra pieces that do not go with an activity, give Dad's shoes instead of own, leave out a needed tool / object, such as spoon when eating
 - Be observant for situations that the child *dislikes* too. E.g., offer disliked foods and teach an acceptable way of rejecting

Prompting Picture Communication: Communicating beyond requests

Communication is about interaction and we interact for variety of reasons. Augmentative Communication can be used not only to **Make Requests** but for many other purposes:

- ✓ Rejecting



- ✓ Calling someone



- ✓ Greeting



- ✓ Labeling things



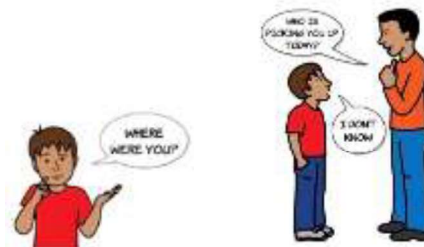
- ✓ Commenting



- ✓ Expressing emotions and physical states



- ✓ Asking and answering questions



- ✓ Describing events



- ✓ Directing people's actions

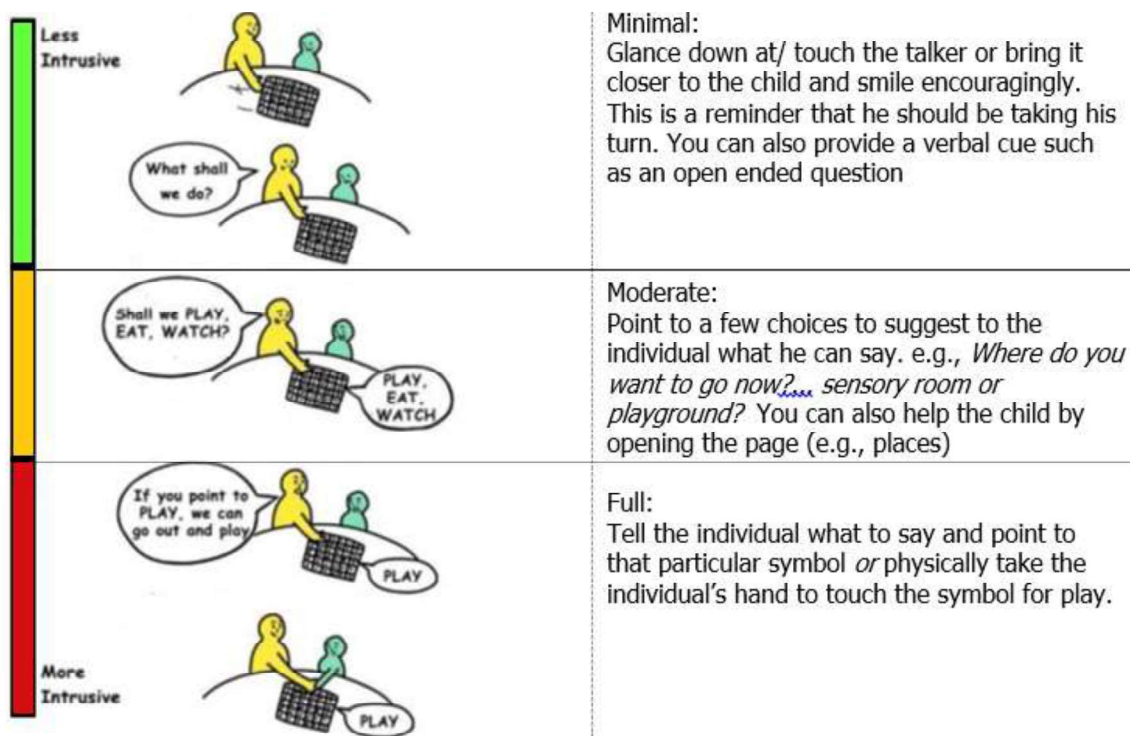


Prompting Picture Communication: Providing Prompts

IN GENERAL:

- Use Full physical assistance *only* when introducing something new; the first few times
- For all other situations, use *Least to Most* intrusive prompts (see charts below*)
- Use physical guidance *only* if the child does not imitate you. Fade ASAP
- Be mindful of the level of prompts you are providing and reduce them gradually
- Verbal prompts are difficult to fade; remove them and use visual prompts as soon as you can

*Modified from the AAC for Caregivers Manual – SPD – Assistive Technology Centre, Singapore



*Scales of Prompting by Communication Partner by Kovacs & Pearson (2007)

<p>Maximal Physical</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Hand-over-hand ➤ Push body part 	<p>Moderate Physical</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Gentle nudge ➤ Guiding hand to multiple button locations 	<p>Minimal Physical</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Touch/tap body part
<p>Maximal Verbal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ "Touch (item)" ➤ "It's the color of the rainbow" 	<p>Moderate Verbal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ "Find your (e.g., feeling) words" ➤ Verbal choices 	<p>Minimal Verbal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ "Tell me with your talker" ➤ Sentence completion
<p>Maximal Visual</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Point to specific target 	<p>Moderate Visual</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Point to general area ➤ Point to choices ➤ Open page on device 	<p>Minimal Visual</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Point to device ➤ Look at device

Prompting Picture Communication:

Practical examples

The chart below shows examples of messages that can be prompted with picture communication during daily routines.

ROUTINE	OPPORTUNITY	PROMPT
SCHOOL ARRIVAL	Matt enters the building; he is carrying his device in his shoulder. His Educational Aid approaches him and says "Hi, Matt!" He smiles back. His EA shows the picture of HI and waits	Max prompts (showing what he needs to do)
	Partner joins Matt to put backpack and lunch away; she withholds helping Matt opening up his backpack, and asks: "What do you need?"	Minimal prompts (asking an open ended question)
FREE PLAY	After seeing Matt joining his sister playing with dinosaurs on the carpet, mom prompts him to use the device by telling him: "I think you want to play with Julie, do you want to ask her?" while opening the Chat folder on Matt's device and then showing him DO YOU WANT TO PLAY WITH ME? button	Max prompt (showing what he needs to do)
	The teacher is modeling a pretend play routine of setting the table with another child, Matt approaches them and places a napkin on the table. He seems interested in participating. The teacher invites him to help set the table and asks: "Come join us, Matt. Do you want to help with PLATES or CUPS while opening the Utensils page	Moderate prompts (giving verbal choices, opening the page)
	Matt takes a pretend toy food belonging to his friend Chris. Chris protests and Matt gives the toy back. The EA prompts Matt to apologize by saying "Chris didn't like you taking the toy away, what do you say to him? while showing I'M SORRY on his device	Max prompts (showing him what he needs to do)
	Dad builds a tall tower with blue blocks and invites Matt to build something. He then tells Matt: "I made a BLUE + TOWER; what do you want to make?"	Minimal prompts (asking open ended question)
CIRCLE TIME	Teacher asks Matt what song he would like them to sing first. EA taps Matt gently on his elbow and looks at the device on Matt's lap	Minimal prompts (providing a subtle gesture)
	At sharing time, teacher asks Matt what he did over the weekend while holding the device on front of him	Minimal prompts (providing a visual cue or reminder)
	Teacher asks Matt to choose which classmate can come up next to tell the weather, and waits	Pause (no prompts)
TRANSITIONS	As teacher announces time to clean up and Matt gets impatient, EA asks "What do you want? while showing him the device	Minimal prompts (asking an open ended question)

Getting Started

Making a Communication Plan

The Basics

- A Communication Plan includes details on both, MODELING and PROMPTING
- Initially you only do MODELING. Provide Modeling many, many times; as much as you can, throughout daily routines and activities. This can be overwhelming. Start by choosing specific words you want to model and choose routines when it is realistic and possible for you to model
- After you have been modeling for a while, you can start PROMPTING use of the system
- Select carefully the words that you are going to PROMPT and the situation/ routine when you are going to prompt. Words should be practical, meaningful, functional, and with clear pay off for the child
- Prompt the child to use the device *only* for those specific words that you are targeting across the Routines you have chosen
- Ideally, start with at least 2 different communicative functions and increase progressively
- Determine level of prompts for each word or message
- Make sure you provide descriptive feedback (e.g., say "I like how you said *I want apple*", as opposed to saying "good job")
- Keep track of words being taught and the level of prompting needed

