

Choosing an AAC System

For children with special communication needs, picking the right AAC system is important. This handout tells you more about choosing the AAC device or method that's best for your child.

AAC stands for **Augmentative and Alternative Communication**, and an **AAC system** includes using tools and methods to help your child communicate. AAC systems can include different methods and devices, including picture boards and electronic devices.

Check your child's communication skills and needs

Your child's **Speech-Language Pathologist**, or **SLP**, will review your child's strengths and needs related to using an AAC system. They will also ask about the people your child sees and the different places where they may need to use AAC. It is important to think about your child's:

- **Hearing.**
- **Vision.**
- **Motor skills**, or movements like their ability to walk and use their hands to touch the device.
- **Speech and language skills**, like how they communicate with and understand others.
- **Attention**, like if they can search for a button they want on the device.
- **Memory**, like if they can remember how to find the word they need on the device.
- **Short-term goals** that your child is working on. Your child's SLP will help you figure these out.
- **Long-term goals and ways to use the device.** Your child's SLP will help your family plan how to use the AAC device over time, as your child's needs change and grow.

AAC device types

There are many types of AAC devices that your child can choose from. Options include:

- **Unaided methods:** Sign language or gestures.
- **Low-tech systems:** Picture boards or communication books.
- **Mid-tech devices:** Simple devices that play recorded audio.
- **High-tech devices:** Tablets and speech-generating devices with communication software or apps. These apps can often be downloaded from an app store on a tablet or smartphone.



Unaided Methods



Low-tech Systems



Mid-tech Systems



High-tech devices

Choosing a device

When choosing a device, it is important to think about how long your child will use the device.

Your child's changing needs

Your child's AAC system may change as their communication needs change.

- Decide whether you want to get started with a short-term device or if you are ready to choose a device that your child will use for a longer period of time.
- Pick a device that you think could grow with your child and be easy to use as they learn.

Feature-matching

Feature-matching is a process where specific features of AAC devices are matched to your child's strengths and needs. Choosing the AAC system that works best for your child through feature-matching helps make sure that the tools and methods used truly make it easier for your child to communicate.

It is important to think about if the device is:

- **Easy to bring to different places.**
- **Easy for your child to learn and use.** For example, if they can use their hands, or if they need special tools to use, see, or hear the device.
- **Easy for other people around your child to learn and use.**
- **Sturdy enough to be used daily** without breaking.
- **Useful to your child:**
 - It has **all the languages** that they need.
 - It has **words organized in a way that makes sense** for your child.

Funding for the device

When choosing a device, it is also important to think about who will pay for it. This could be:

- Your child's Health insurance.
- Your child's school.
- Your state program.
- Yourself, from your own funding.

Depending on the funding process, you may need to apply for the device and wait for approval.

Talk with your child's **Speech Language Pathologist** if you have any questions about device funding.

Device trials

It is possible to test different AAC options before deciding which one to stay with:

- **Many AAC devices give you trial periods**, which allow your child to use them before making a final choice about sticking with them.
- **Training is also available to help you and your child get started.** Talk with your child's **Speech-Language Pathologist** to learn more about getting AAC device training.

There are different AAC tools for different needs

Every child is different and will have different AAC needs. Many children use more than one method, because each one has its own strengths. For example:

- **Non-electronic devices do not need to be charged** and may be easier to carry around. Electronic devices need to be charged or use batteries.
- **Non-electronic devices often have fewer words, which can be helpful for patients who need to focus on a specific set of words** for their lifestyle and activities.
- **Electronic devices can be helpful for patients who need to have more words to pick from.**
- **Electronic devices can be easier to use for patients who are unable to use their hands.** They can be used with different tools, such as switches, mice, and eye gaze.

Talk with your child's **Speech-Language Pathologist** if you have any questions about this handout.