

COMMUNICATION MATTERS



Focus on...

What can I say?

Vocabularies for augmentative
and alternative communication
(AAC) systems



www.communicationmatters.org.uk



Introduction

If you are able to speak then you can say whatever you want. There are some people who are not able to speak and they may use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) systems to allow them to express themselves. (See leaflet *Focus on ... What is AAC?* for more information about AAC).

Dog



When you speak your words act as symbols for what you are meaning, for instance if you say the word 'dog' you mean a furry animal which barks and has four legs and a tail. For someone using an AAC system, the meaning of the word 'dog' might be conveyed with a sign for 'dog', e.g. by patting your leg, by spelling out the letters 'D', 'O', 'G' on a keyboard, by a photograph of a dog, by a picture symbol of a dog, or by an object to indicate 'dog' such as a dog's lead.

If the person using an AAC system is able to spell, then they are able to spell out whatever they want to say in much the same way as someone who is able to speak naturally can say what they want to. However, for those using AAC who are not able to spell, the AAC system 'vocabulary' will determine what they can say. It is very difficult to choose the vocabulary for someone. This leaflet will give you some ideas of where to start.

Effective Vocabularies

Imagine that from now on you can talk as much as you like, but you can only use the same 100 words. You would need to choose the best 100 words to let you communicate:

- most effectively
- with the widest range of people
- about the widest range of topics
- now and in the future

It is difficult to think of which words you are most likely to need – but this is the sort of thing you would have to think about if you were designing an AAC system for someone who could not talk.

Can I...



You would need the vocabulary to be flexible

If you were the person using AAC, you would want words to help you:

- start, end and control conversations (e.g. *Can I ask you a question? OK, I'm off now. I'd like to talk to you about ...*)
- say what you want, what you need, and how you feel (e.g. *I want to or don't want to – watch TV now. I need to go to the bathroom. I'm feeling a bit fed up just now.*)
- clear up misunderstandings (e.g. *That's not what I meant. I'll say it another way.*)
- say things that you have never said before in your life (e.g. *Will you marry me?*)
- talk about your interests (e.g. *That photo has a good depth of field.*)
- ask questions (e.g. *What did you do on holiday?*)
- make positive and negative comments (e.g. *I really like that. I think that class is boring.*)
- say things angrily, politely, cheekily (e.g. *When are you going to make that cup of tea – I asked you 10 minutes ago! Please can I have a cup of tea? I'll die of thirst before you get round to making that cup of tea!*)
- tell jokes (e.g. *Knock, knock. Who's there?...*)

You would want a personalised vocabulary

If you were the person using AAC you would want a vocabulary reflecting:

- your personality
- your age
- your culture
- your gender



Augmentative and Alternative Communication

(AAC) is the term used to describe methods of communication which can be used to supplement the more usual methods of speech and writing when these are impaired.

AAC may include unaided systems such as signing and gesture, as well as aided techniques ranging from picture charts to the most sophisticated computer technology currently available. AAC can be a way to help someone understand, as well as a means of expression.

What words?

Our personal vocabulary is made up of a mixture of everyday words, personal words, and special words. If you were the person using AAC you would want to be able to use everyday, personal and special words.



- **Everyday Words** These are words that crop up all day, every day. Studies show that 100 everyday words account for 60% of everything we say.
- **Personal Words** These are words that are a bit more unusual but are still used a lot. These will include the names of places, people and activities that are important to the individual. If you were the person using AAC you would want to be involved in the choice of these words. Perhaps someone who knows you well could help suggest vocabulary that you might want.
- **Special Words** These are words for special topics and situations, such as: jokes, compliments and insults, specific interests, words about a job, hobby or school work, 'special event' words (for a holiday, sports day, etc). This will need updating quite often – you might want to be able to talk about a holiday, just before you go on holiday, while you're there and for a while afterwards – you might not want to be stuck talking about the same holiday two years later! If you were an adult you would not want to be stuck with the special words that you had as a child.



Who chooses the vocabulary?

If you were the person using AAC you would want to be involved in choosing the vocabulary available to you. You would want to be central to a team of people who know you well, such as family members, enablers and professionals, who may all have ideas about what useful vocabulary should be included.

Useful Resources

Some examples of 'core vocabulary':

- **Blissymbolics** – 100 & 400 symbol Blissboards.
Available from Blissymbol Communication UK,
c/o The ACE Centre, 92 Windmill Road, Oxford OX3 7DR
Website: www.blissymbols.co.uk

Some high tech vocabulary application programs

- **CALLtalk – CALL Scotland**, Paterson's Land,
Holyrood Road, Edinburgh EH8 8AQ Tel: 0131 651 6235
Website: www.callscotland.org.uk
- **Ingfield Dynamic Vocabulary Sets** – developed at Ingfield
Manor School, Five Oaks, Billingshurst, West Sussex RH14 9AX
Tel: 01403 782294. Email: ingfield.manor@scope.org.uk
- **Minspeak Application Programs** – Liberator Ltd,
Whitegates, High Street, Swinstead, Lincolnshire NG33 4PA,
Tel: 01733 370470. Email: info@liberatorco.uk
Website: www.liberator.co.uk

There are plenty of online resources on the Communication Matters website: **www.communicationmatters.org.uk/**

- Why not join the AAC Forum to find out more from people who use and work with AAC. Instructions on how to join are available here:
www.communicationmatters.org.uk/page/aac-forum
- Communication Matters is also on Facebook:
www.facebook.com/communicationmattersuk
and Twitter: **@Comm_Matters**
- The AACknowledge website is for those interested in the latest research, summarised in Plain English:
www.aacknowledge.org.uk/
- AAC E-Learning is a 20 minute online course on an introduction to AAC:
www.aacelearning.org.uk/



Further Information

Please look at the *Communication Matters* website for more information on specialist centres in your area that can provide support when choosing vocabularies.



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Other topics in the ‘Focus on...’ series

Accessing communication aids and computers

Communicating with patients who have
speech/language difficulties

First steps

Let your hands do the talking

Speaking with someone who uses AAC

Using symbols for communication

What is AAC?

These leaflets are funded by



who swam, ran and cycled
to fundraise for this CM resource



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