Focus on...

What can I say?

Vocabularies for augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) systems

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 swim, run and cycled to raise money for the CM resource

Further Information

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- Ingfield Dynamic Vocabulary Sets – developed at Ingfield
  Manor School, Five Oaks, Billingshurst, West Sussex RH14 9AX
  Tel: 01403 782294. Email: ingfield.manor@isrsc.org.uk

- Minspeak Application Programs – Liberator Ltd,
  Whitegates, High Street, Swindon, Wiltshire SN53 4PA
  Tel: 01793 737347. Email: info@liberatorco.uk
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**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).

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.

**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. (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’d be off 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

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.

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What is AAC?

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 drop 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.
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