AAC BEST PRACTICES

Medical Support Services

There has been a lot of research on individuals who learn to communicate using AAC. Across many studies, these four best practices have been proven to work! Keep in mind, while becoming familiar with an AAC system might feel overwhelming or unnatural at first, the process for teaching an AAC user is very similar to how we'd teach anyone to understand and use a language.

#1: ACCESS

All people learning a language require access to that language. We wouldn't expect a baby to learn to talk without access to hearing and interacting with that language. We wouldn't expect a baby to learn to talk if they were only spoken to for 1 hour a day. AAC users are the same way. They need consistent access to their communication systems in order to become familiar enough to learn the system and use it. Therefore, AAC best practice #1 is access. Our AAC users need access to their communication system all day, at all times, and in all environments. Without consistent access, the rest of the best practices will not be effective.

#2: MODELING

We need to expose our AAC users to language in the same way as babies learning to talk. When we find out a child isn't developing verbal language in a typical way, we want to expose them to language using a different modality. Just as you'd talk to a baby, or someone learning English, we need to talk to our AAC users in their language – on their AAC system. That means you need to use their system to say what you're thinking, what you're doing, and what you're telling them, AND what they may be thinking, what they're doing, and what they're trying to tell you.

Use the system as much as possible throughout the day. Try to get so good, that when you speak around or to the child, that you're using the system more often than you're not. There's so many different things that you can model on the communication system. You can label things around you, tell jokes, ask for things, say "hi" and "bye", request help, share information, or answer questions. As you model, you'll start to get familiar with the communication system. The second AAC best practice is modeling the system for the learner

#3: CORE VOCABULARY

As you model on the device, you may start to notice that you use some words much more often than others. Another "best practice" for AAC implementation is the use of core vocabulary. Core vocabulary comprises 80% of what we say and it only consists of about 200 words! Effective AAC systems should be balanced this way. A communication system should be primarily focused on core vocabulary words such as "yes", "more", "you", "was", "on", "go", or "that". Fringe vocabulary words, or more specific words, such as "Elmo", "volcano", "Susan", "New York City", "bucket", or "pizza" should also be included on a child's communication system, however the emphasis should always be on teaching and modeling core vocabulary as those words tend to be highly flexible and versatile. The third best practice is core vocabulary.

#4: COMMUNICATION OPPORTUNITIES

As you may know, providing exposure to a language isn't often enough to learn it. We need to be given opportunities to practice using it as well! Many times, because AAC users have a different way of communicating that can be intimidating or confusing to others, they aren't given frequent opportunities to communicate. Research has shown that in order for an AAC system to be most effective, AAC users need at least 200 opportunities to use it every day. While this might seem like a lot, think about how many opportunities typical, verbal speakers have to speak in a day. The fourth and final AAC best practice is creating communication opportunities

Stick with these four best practices, and with time, you'll develop confidence in your skills and become a more effective communication partner for AAC users. Seeing progress with AAC can take a lot of time and patience but remind yourself that it takes a full year of exposure before babies start talking and even longer before they put together words. Give it time and don't rush the process.

Remember, the four best practices when teaching an AAC system are...

ACCESS → MODELING → CORE VOCABULARY → COMMUNICATION OPPORTUNITIES

Keep the AAC system out at all times, use it to show the AAC user how it's done, focus on core vocabulary, and set up as many communication opportunities as possible!