

AAC: Creating Communication Boards

Everyone has something to say. For those that are unable to verbalize their wants, needs, thoughts, and opinions, communication boards and devices provide the power to communicate and connect with others. Think back as a child and try to remember how many times you ran into the house exclaiming that you were hungry or thirsty. If something hurt internally (e.g., broken bone, stomach ache), did you communicate the problem to others? Now imagine not having the ability to verbalize such things. If one is unable to communicate effectively, it is difficult to imagine the frustration and energy it would take to try to get the message across. The following information provided references children at times, but the development of AAC boards/devices is basically the same for both children and adults.

1. In the beginning, general rule of thumb is to keep it **SIMPLE**. You can create a communication board using paper and pencil or more complex boards that use a variety of cells filling a page with different choices based on the communicative intent of the user.
 - a. Start by using 1 large symbol with one other symbol that has no communicative meaning.
 - b. Vary the location of the communicative and non-communicative symbols to be sure that the user is choosing the symbol based on meaning and not location.
2. Keep in mind that there is a hierarchy of symbols established in the early literature. Begin with real objects, moving to photographs, then line drawings, symbols, and finally, text. The current recommendation is that the hierarchy is less important for early language learners. It is more important to choose a set of symbols that the person using the communication board, and the family, can understand.
3. Communication boards are created to:
 - a. To teach communication interchange
 - b. Provide a visual representation of wants/needs/requests
 - c. Provide a visual representation of select vocabulary
 - i. The vocabulary used for a communication board should be chosen very carefully.
 1. Make sure the vocabulary is context-specific
 - a. In a school setting, a communication board could be centered around a lesson (e.g., thematic unit about farm animals)
 - b. The child may need a board specifically for the lunch room, providing vocabulary such as: more, help, I like, I don't like.
 - ii. Vocabulary selection should be based on specific factors such as high frequency words, using words that are age-appropriate, tangibly-, or socially- reinforcing.
 1. High frequency words (i.e., core vocabulary words) have been published based on usage.
 - a. Fringe vocabulary are words specific to a lesson or an occasion.

2. Previously, the child may have used vocalizations, gestures, or behaviors to try to get his/her message across. To help an AAC user understand the power of communication using a communication board, s/he will need a selection of words that are reinforcing.
 - a. A symbol is considered reinforcing if it allows the AAC user to receive the requested, tangible item (e.g., food, toys, activities).
 - b. Symbols can also be socially reinforcing, allowing the AAC user to gain the attention of a desired person.
 3. Age-appropriateness of the vocabulary is another important consideration when designing a communication board.
 - a. If you are working with the teenage population, keep in mind any slang terms that may be popular at the time (e.g., “that’s sick,” “lol,” “omg”).
 4. Organization of the vocabulary on the communication board should allow the user to communicate with speed and efficiency.
 - a. Once you have the vocabulary organized, do not change locations of the symbols unless you are able to determine that the words are not being used due to their location on the board.
 - b. Vocabulary can be organized by themes as one example.
 - c. One symbol can represent *concepts* (e.g., the symbol for “drink” can represent, “I want something to drink”).
4. When communicating with an AAC user:
- a. Use short and simple sentences, allowing the AAC user time to process and understand what you are saying
 - b. Make your directions clear and concise
 - c. If you ask an AAC user a question, allow plenty of time for the answer
 - d. Besides keeping your language concise, pair your verbal information with symbols or pictures to increase understanding by an AAC user
 - i. Communication boards can be created for and shared with members of the community: police, emergency responders, school nurse, mall security, neighbors
 - e. When asking questions, provide paper/pencil allowing an AAC user to write his/her response when/if s/he cannot verbally respond.
 - i. *You* could write down different responses/choices and ask him/her to circle his/her selection.
 - f. When in a new or stressful situation, an AAC user may exhibit atypical behavior (e.g. laugh when stressed or scared) which could be interpreted as disrespectful or even confrontational.
 - i. If possible, find a familiar person to help you communicate and explain what you want/need before you do anything, to help the AAC user understand what is happening.

5. Communication boards are used in a variety of contexts and it is important that each fits the context-specific routine of where it is being used.
 - a. AAC boards used at home should be familiar to all family members
 - b. Family should know the purpose of the device and how they can support the AAC user.
 - c. An AAC board used at school will need to be used across multiple environments so those professionals should also be educated on the use and purpose of the AAC device.
 - d. The use of simultaneous communication, also called “aided language stimulation,” involves pointing to the symbol on the AAC user’s communication board while simultaneously speaking the message you want to convey.
 - i. This assists the AAC user’s development and understanding of both receptive and expressive language.
 1. If the AAC user has some understanding of spoken language, s/he may make the connection between the AAC equivalents on his/her AAC device.
 2. Some AAC users will respond better to this approach than others depending on his/her learning style (i.e., visual versus auditory).
 - e. To generate interest and usage in the AAC board/device (i.e., communication temptation), one can set up a situation where the AAC user uses the board/device to communicate a strong like or dislike for something.
 - i. You will need to do some investigating ahead of time to learn what the AAC user enjoys versus not to create an appropriate scenario.
 - ii. An example would be placing a snack, the AAC user enjoys, in a tightly-sealed container, setting it on the table in front of the AAC user. The child may try to open the container, but when s/he is unsuccessful, turns to you and hands you the container. In which case you would ask, “What?” and wait for a response from the child. If the child does not provide the appropriate response using the communication board/device, you model the response using just the board/device, models a verbal message, or models simultaneous communication.
6. Etiquette when communicating with an AAC user is an important consideration, so here are some tips for successful interactions:
 - a. Keep it natural – it is just like communicating with anyone else
 - b. Communicate directly with the AAC user if s/he is accompanied by an adult helper.
 - i. If communication breaks down, ask clarifying questions to the AAC user and not the person accompanying him/her as a show of respect.
 - ii. You can ask the accompanying person if there are any communication *tips* specific to the AAC user
 - iii. If you do need to converse with the accompanying person regarding communication with the AAC user, then tell the AAC user that you would like to learn more about how s/he communicates, before you turn to talk to the accompanying adult.

- c. If you will be communicating with the AAC user on a regular basis, learn the basic operation of the AAC device in order to make necessary adjustments for him/her by consulting with the technology team, if applicable. Learn how to:
 - i. On/Off
 - ii. Volume adjustment
 - iii. Trouble-shoot if the screen freezes
 - iv. How to charge the board
 - v. How to move from one screen/page to the next and back to Home
 - d. Be sure to give the AAC user a lot of time to respond to your questions or comments
 - i. As s/he begins to type a response, be aware that jumping in to guess what the response will be as the AAC user begins to type out the answer
 - 1. Some AAC users will predicting what the response was going to be offensive
 - a. Make sure you have enough information to make a reasonable prediction about the intended message
 - 2. Some AAC users will be appreciative that they did not need to type out the complete response
 - ii. If you try to guess the response, be sure to ask the AAC user if your prediction was correct. If it was, then model the response for him/her.
7. Prompting can be used to help AAC learners remember how they should respond in a situation.
- a. As a rule, we do not want to create a type of communication system that relies on prompting.
 - b. Begin with prompts that are easiest to fade which are typically the most intrusive.
 - i. Physical Guidance (you physically help the AAC learner to press the switch/device)
 - ii. Physical Assistance (you move the AAC learner toward the switch/device)
 - iii. Gestures (you point to the switch/device)
 - iv. Modeling (you model how to use the switch/device)
 - v. Verbal Mands (you verbally rephrase questions and instruct the learner to touch the switch/device)
 - vi. Natural Verbal Prompts (you use natural questions and wait for the AAC learner to respond).

As you can see, developing a communication board/device needs to take into account the AAC user (e.g., physical-, mental- abilities), the user's wants/needs, the context in which it will be used, and the audience. Incorporating the following considerations when designing a type of AAC board/device: the use of high frequency words and/or fringe vocabulary, using only the AAC board/device versus a verbal response versus simultaneous communication, the use of prompting – but only when *necessary*, and implementing proper AAC etiquette; is critical for the development of a board/device that allows the user to be an effective communicator.

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