

Myth – AAC will negatively impact speech and language development

"Dada" "Mama" "Baba" These are the first words of many children. Parents look forward to them with expectation.

We expect children to start talking because that is how most people communicate. Sometimes, a child doesn't start to talk or their speech is very hard to understand. Other children, say or repeat a few things but may not communicate successfully to all listeners in all situations. When this happens, introduction of AAC is suggested.

AAC or augmentative and alternative communication refers to communication tools and techniques to supplement communication for people who have difficulty with speech. AAC includes pointing, gestures, communication books and boards as well as communication apps and devices.



In speaking with family members, caregivers, teachers, and others over the years, we have heard concerns like these:



"Use of AAC will keep him from talking"

"Introduction of AAC means we have given up on speech"

"AAC will become a crutch and she will no longer try to speak. She will take the easy way out and use AAC"

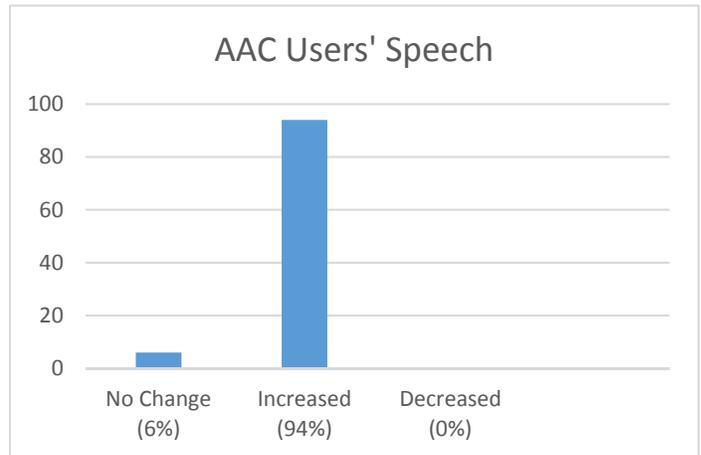
"He is too young for AAC. We need to give him more time to use speech before starting AAC"

While we can certainly understand these concerns, they are not true. **AAC will not keep a child from speaking or developing language.** It is never the 'easy way out' because if speech was possible, that would always be 'easier' for the child to use.

How do we know that AAC will not keep someone from talking?

We have evidence from leading researchers as well as family members, therapists and teachers who have also shared their insights. Let's review the research first.

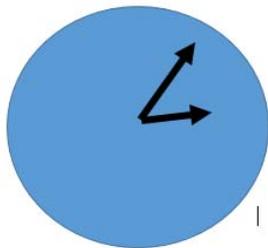
Researchers, Millar, Light & Schlosser³, reviewed previously published studies that focused on "speech production before, during and after AAC use." Also, Schlosser & Wendt⁵ reviewed previously published studies describing the "effects of AAC on speech production in children with autism or developmental disorder-not otherwise specified." They all found that most of the studies showed increases in speech production, some stayed the same but "none reported a decline." The combined data from these studies is reflected in the chart.



Other researchers looked at AAC use for people with specific diagnoses. They found that AAC improved speech for people after a traumatic brain injury² and Childhood Apraxia of Speech⁴.

So, evidence tells us that AAC does not keep a child from talking. In fact, it can help improve speech and language use and development. Dr. Laura DeThorne¹ even recommends using AAC with young children who are not imitating speech (repeating) as a means of encouraging natural speech development. In other words, AAC can be an important tool for treatment as well as a bridge into functional communication. It is important to consider AAC as a part of treatment rather than an alternative or last resort.

How much improvement in speech should we expect and how quickly?



This really depends on the individual child according to several studies focusing on individual with autism. According to Millar, Light & Schlosser's³ review of studies, increases in speech were "modest." They added that improvement in speech production occurred immediately in some individuals while in 21% improvement took some time.

As we might expect, there does not appear to be a hard and fast rule regarding how much or how quickly improvement in speech production may occur (or if it will occur) following introduction of AAC. However, Schlosser & Wendt⁵, point out that the "potential for lack of natural speech production gains...does not negate the value of AAC interventions." In other words, although significant improvement in speech production is not always guaranteed, it is certain that the use of AAC will not keep speech from improving or decrease speech production and language development.

How do natural speech and AAC work together?

Use of speech and AAC does not require you to pick one. They are used together³. In fact, we all use multiple forms of communication on a daily basis. We talk, point, wave, and use facial expression and body language. We make decisions about what method of communication we use based on the environment, our communication partner and the message.

The child who uses AAC is no different. AAC, speech, pointing, gestures, facial expression and body language co-exist as part of his 'multi-modal' communication system. Just as we do, he needs to make decisions about which mode of communication to use based on the environment, communication partner and message.

What are the truths about AAC and speech?



- AAC will NOT keep someone from developing or using natural speech.
- AAC tends to have a positive effect on speech production and has been recommended as a treatment method for development of natural speech and language.
- Gains in speech production following introduction of AAC vary from individual-to-individual.
- AAC can be one part of an individual's overall communication system that may also include natural speech.
- AAC enhances an individual's ability to communicate effectively and independently with various listeners.

References

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