

## Myth – Use of AAC can be started too young

This myth may be based on a number of beliefs, including two that are very common:

- Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) will keep children from talking.
- Certain skills are needed before AAC can be introduced<sup>3,8</sup>.

### *Impact of AAC*

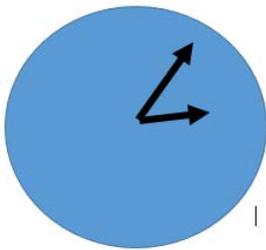
Research tells us that AAC can positively impact speech production<sup>3</sup>. In fact, Dr. Laura DeThorne<sup>4</sup> recommended AAC as an evidence-based technique for the purpose of initiating speech production in children who are not imitating speech.

AAC also has been found to positively impact children's language, cognition, and reading skills. With AAC, children's participation in developmentally important social, educational and play environments increase as well<sup>2</sup>. In a recent study, researchers determined AAC interventions may serve to improve even more developmental areas for very young children, such as physical movement skills<sup>9</sup>.



Similar findings were summarized in 2007 by the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child<sup>8</sup> that the long-term benefits of AAC interventions for young children are positive. They stated that it is important to focus on AAC use with infants and toddlers because there is evidence that a child's early learning experiences during the **first 3 years** of life lay the foundation for later brain development.

### *Cost of Waiting*



Communication and language development impact many other skills too including cognition (thinking skills), reading, play, social interaction. Since AAC impacts communication and language development, let's make sure that children have early access to AAC so that they have every opportunity to reach their potential in every area of development.

Early use of AAC ensures that communication needs of each child will be met regardless of their age and cognitive ability<sup>1</sup>. So why withhold or delay AAC on the basis that a child 'isn't ready yet' to use AAC?

### *Prerequisites to Introducing AAC*

Some people believe that a child needs to have specific skills to use AAC. They think that a child must be able to communicate independently. They may also believe that a child needs to have certain cognitive (thinking) skills like cause/effect (one event is caused by another), means-end (planning steps to a goal), object permanence (objects still exist even if not seen, heard or touched) and others. This idea has proven to be incorrect.

Researchers Kangas & Lloyd<sup>7</sup> reviewed a variety of early language studies and found that cognitive development and speech and language development are indeed related but not in the way many thought. People believed that cognitive development had to happen before speech and language development started but Kangas and Lloyd found that language skills sometimes appeared before the expected cognitive skills had been developed. They concluded that language and thinking developed together and that “communication can also be a vehicle for expanding cognitive skills.”

However, this is not the only reason why delay or withholding of AAC might occur. It may also take place when people think that communication must be an independent act (completed without assistance). This view ignores the fact that none of us communicate independently<sup>3</sup>. Even the most articulate speaker needs to be prompted to recall a word occasionally. They are also asked questions to clarify a statement or are cued to remember a detail. Communication does not happen in a vacuum. We rely on others to interact with us to establish meaning (co-construction) and to provide assistance/support when needed. This is especially true for young children<sup>3</sup>. Doesn't waiting until someone appears to communicate without assistance to trial AAC seem backward? Using AAC will help young children learn to communicate more independently.

### *Where do we begin?*

So, how do we begin to pursue AAC for a young child? It is a decision based on communication needs for each individual child. An example of individualized plans are below and should include a number of different methods of communication.

 <p>Jenny</p>	 <p>Rachael</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Points to what she needs</li> <li>• Gestures to communicate what she wants</li> <li>• Vocalizes to get attention</li> <li>• Easy VSD to communicate during play</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vocalizing and single message device to get attention</li> <li>• Easy VSD to communicate during play, daily activities and some choice making</li> <li>• Picture symbols around the house for other choice making</li> </ul>

It's important to remember that AAC strategies and tools can and should be used to help the development of cognitive and language abilities that further a child's development. It can also impact a child's behavior and ability to participate in daily activities. Who do you think behaves better and is less frustrated; a 2-year old who cannot tell you what he wants to eat or a 2-year old who has a way to communicate exactly what he would like? AAC support should not be eliminated or delayed based on a child's age, but rather seen as a possible tool to overcome communication challenges for anyone who needs a way to supplement their speech.

## AAC for Young Children



The reality of AAC for young children is that there are no prerequisites for communication when using AAC supports. As we consider AAC for young children, Drager and her colleagues<sup>5,6</sup> suggest: Intervention should target multiple modes of communication, such as vocalizations, gestures, and low technology systems (e.g., boards or books) that impose fewer learning demands, as well as a focus on appropriate instruction for [high tech] AAC technologies.

With this in mind, can AAC be introduced too early? We don't believe so, and below are the realities we have discovered as we reviewed numerous research articles on this topic.

- Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) does not keep children from talking but has a positive effect on speech production<sup>3</sup>.
- AAC is not limited to multi-page communication books and speech generating devices but includes a variety of tools and techniques of varying levels of complexity.
- There are no prerequisites for communication including AAC<sup>7,9</sup>.
- AAC should not be eliminated or delayed based because of a child's age or behavior. Rather, AAC may help address facilitate development and overcome behavior issues.

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