

FREE GUIDE

AAC Basics for Parents

Communication is a right, not a milestone

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) is any method a person uses to communicate beyond natural speech.

If your child is non-verbal, minimally verbal, or has difficulty being understood, AAC can give them a reliable way to express their wants, needs, thoughts, and feelings, sometimes for the first time. AAC is not a last resort. It is a communication right.

"Children learn to speak by hearing speech. AAC users learn to communicate with their device by seeing others use it. Your job isn't to test them. Your job is to model."



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Types of AAC

AAC exists on a spectrum from no technology at all to sophisticated speech-generating devices. Most children use a combination depending on the situation.

No-tech AAC

No materials needed, which means it is always available and never needs charging.

- **Gestures and body language:** pointing, nodding, reaching, leading you by the hand
- **Facial expressions:** intentional yes/no, like/dislike
- **Sign language:** formal systems (ASL, Makaton) or simplified "key word signing" alongside speech
- **Eye gaze:** directed looking to indicate choices or respond yes/no

Always encourage these alongside other AAC. Your child's natural gestures are valid communication in their own right.

Low-tech AAC

Physical materials, no power needed. Durable, portable, easy to customize.

- **Picture exchange (PECS):** structured system where the child hands you a card to request
- **Communication boards:** a grid of pictures, symbols, or words your child uses often
- **Choice boards:** simplified 2 to 4 options to support decision-making
- **First-Then boards:** visual schedules showing the current task and what comes next

Low-tech is an excellent starting point and can be made at home using free symbol libraries (SymbolStix, Boardmaker-style printables).

Mid-tech AAC

Battery-powered but simpler than full speech-generating devices.

- **Single-message switches** (like a Big Mac button): records one message that plays when pressed
- **Step-by-step communicators:** record a sequence of messages that play in order
- **GoTalk devices:** simple grid devices with pre-recorded messages behind picture overlays

High-tech AAC

Speech-generating devices: tablets, dedicated devices, or apps that produce synthesized or recorded speech.

- **Tablets with AAC apps** (iPad, Android): the most flexible and accessible option
- **Dedicated SGDs** (Tobii Dynavox, Salthillo): purpose-built, often covered by insurance, can include eye-gaze
- **Robust vocabulary systems:** thousands of words organized by motor pattern, allowing real generative language

Popular AAC apps

An SLP familiar with AAC can help you choose based on your child's motor skills, cognitive profile, and communication goals.

App	What to know
Proloquo2Go (AssistiveWare)	iPad. SymbolStix or Widgit symbols, multiple grid sizes and vocabulary levels. Large professional community. Subscription required.
TouchChat HD (Saltillo)	iOS and Android. Supports WordPower, Unity, LAMP Words for Life vocabulary files. Flexible and school-friendly.
LAMP Words for Life	iOS and Android. Each word always lives in the same location, building muscle memory. Particularly effective for children who benefit from consistent motor patterns.
Snap + Core First (Tobii Dynavox)	iPad and Windows. Visual scene plus grid interface. Tobii Dynavox also makes dedicated hardware. Strong data-tracking for therapists.
CoughDrop	Cloud-based, works on virtually any device (iPad, Android, Chromebook, Windows). Boards sync across devices. Strong open-source board community.
Cboard (free)	Browser-based, free, open source. Ideal for families waiting for insurance approval. Uses ARASAAC symbols.

VOCABULARY DEPTH MATTERS

"Robust" AAC means your child can build any sentence, not just request preferred items. A system that only has "I want milk" buttons is closed; a system with thousands of words organized by category is open. Open systems are what build language.

Five common AAC myths

Myth 1: AAC will prevent my child from learning to talk.

Reality: Research consistently shows the opposite. AAC supports speech development; it does not replace it. When children have a reliable way to communicate, the pressure to produce speech decreases, and for many children, verbal speech actually increases.

Myth 2: My child isn't ready. They need to reach a cognitive level first.

Reality: There is no cognitive prerequisite for AAC. Communication is a basic human need. AAC can be introduced to toddlers and even infants at risk of communication delay. Waiting can mean months or years of frustration for your child.

Myth 3: My child has some words. They don't need AAC.

Reality: A child who can produce 20 words under ideal conditions but cannot reliably communicate their needs, pains, or preferences is still communication-impaired. AAC is not only for fully non-verbal children. Many AAC users also have functional speech, and the two work together.

Myth 4: AAC is too complicated for my child to learn.

Reality: AAC systems are designed to grow with the child. Starting points can be as simple as two picture choices. Consistent modeling from caregivers is the key. The child does not need to fully understand the system before being exposed to it.

Myth 5: The school or therapist will handle it. I don't need to use it at home.

Reality: AAC works only when used consistently across all environments. If AAC is only present at school or therapy, the child has no reason to use it at home, and generalization stalls. Parents are the most important communication partners their child has.

How to model AAC at home

Modeling, sometimes called "aided language input," is the single most important thing a parent can do to support AAC. It means using your child's AAC system yourself while you talk to them, so they can see how communication works.

1. Learn the system before expecting your child to use it

Before you can model, you need to know where things are. Spend time exploring the app or board. Can you find "more," "help," "stop," "I want," "eat," "play"? The faster you can navigate, the more natural your modeling feels.

2. Model during natural routines, not as a lesson

Modeling works best woven into everyday life, not as a formal teaching session. During snack: touch "eat" + "apple" before giving the apple. During play: touch "more" every time you hand them a toy. During bath: touch "water" + "warm" while filling the tub.

3. Use the device alongside your own speech

You don't stop talking. You talk normally AND simultaneously touch the words on the device. "Time to eat dinner" + touch "eat." "Are you hungry?" + touch "hungry." Your voice and the device work together.

4. Follow your child's lead

Model vocabulary around what your child is interested in right now. If they're fixated on a toy train: "train," "go," "fast," "more," "crash." Interest drives attention, and attention drives learning.

5. Don't demand or prompt

Counterintuitive but important: your job during modeling is to show, not require. Pressure to perform makes the device feel stressful. Model, create opportunities, trust that your child is watching and learning even when not visibly responding.

6. Celebrate any attempt

If your child touches the device at all, even by accident, respond as if it was intentional. "Oh, you want more! Here you go!" Over time, accidental presses become intentional ones.

7. Keep the device accessible

The device cannot be used if it's locked in a bag or only available during therapy. AAC is most effective when physically available at all times: within arm's reach, charged, ready.

Getting started

A clear path forward, in order:

- Talk to your child's pediatrician** about a referral for a Speech-Language Pathology evaluation, specifically requesting an augmentative communication evaluation.
- Contact your school district** if your child is school-age (3 or older). Under IDEA, children may be entitled to an AAC device as part of their IEP.
- Contact Early Intervention** if your child is under 3. AAC can be included in an IFSP (Individualized Family Service Plan).
- Ask about a device trial.** Many SLPs and AAC vendors (Tobii Dynavox, Saltillo) offer free trial periods so a child can try a system before insurance is pursued.
- Start low-tech while you wait.** A simple choice board with pictures of favorite things costs nothing and starts building habits immediately.
- Connect with other AAC families.** Facebook groups like "AAC for Kids" and "Apraxia-KIDS" are rich sources of peer support and practical advice.

When to seek professional help

Get an AAC evaluation from a qualified SLP if:

- Your child is 18 months or older and not yet using words reliably
- Your child has words but cannot effectively communicate wants, needs, or discomfort
- Your child's speech is not understood by unfamiliar adults after age 3 to 4
- Your child shows frustration, aggression, or self-injury linked to communication breakdowns
- You've started a low-tech system but seen no progress after two to three months of consistent use
- Communication skills have regressed

One caregiver link, every team needs

Beacon's Pass the Baton (free at every tier) gives you a single link that any caregiver can read: sitter, grandparent, IEP team, new SLP. It includes the AAC system you use, the words your child relies on most, what works at transitions, and what triggers shutdown. No app install required.

→ beacon.spectrumunlocked.com/foundation/baton

Communication is a right

If your child's only consistent way to say "I'm in pain" is a meltdown, the meltdown is the message. AAC gives them a different message to send. You don't need to wait for them to be "ready." You need to start modeling now and trust that they're watching.

"The goal isn't to teach your child the device. The goal is to give them a voice and let them decide what to do with it."

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