The Art & Science of AAC Intervention
by Gail M. Van Tatenhove, PA, MS, CCC-SLP

How do you interact with a person who uses AAC (PWUAAC) who may be an emerging communicator and has limited interest in communicating? What do you do in order to stimulate and motivate language output and communication interaction? There is an art and science to being an effective communication partner and AAC teacher. This art & science is reflected in the following principles.

Become a PWUAAC.
- Teach yourself to learn to talk with the person's AAC system, regardless of the simplicity or complexity of the AAC system. You can't teach what you don't know.
- Practice using the AAC system in classroom activities (e.g., art, reading, circle time) so you can be prepared to model that vocabulary during the activity.

Use an AAC system that provides quick and easy access to appropriate vocabulary.
- Identify a range of communicative functions/purposes and have several words available that can be used to communicate those functions.
- Provide words from ALL word classes.

Manage the physical space.
- Maintain a close physical proximity between you and the PWUAAC. In some cases, this helps control the person's behaviors and allows you to be able to more quickly recognize and manage behaviors.
- Don't be afraid of providing appropriate touch in order to make a connection between you and the PWUAAC. Some suggest that even the simplest physical connection, such as touch knees together, provides some kind of "closeness" that subconsciously communicates trust and acceptance. (The Secret Life of Bees – "Every living thing responds to love.")
- Remove distractions, including things, noise, lights, smells, etc.

Provide verbal and visual feedback.
- Respond with appropriate feedback for communication attempts.
- Be cautious about providing too much verbal "noise" while interacting. If the person is struggling with his/her access and is making mistakes or searching for the correct word, you don't want to be talking over their attempts to be accurate or find the correct word. Wait quietly and offer help only as needed.
- Expectant Delay (Watch-Wait) is a valuable tool. Maintain eye contact with the person while you wait quietly with an expectant look on your face.
- Figure out how you'll signal expectant delay when the person is using eye gaze with an AAC device.

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Use a variety of environmental "set-up" strategies and communication partner strategies to encourage communication attempts.

- Temptations = Set-up with environment to "tempt" the person to communicate (e.g., eat in front of the PWUAAC, wear something very bizarre, sit with your back to the person while playing with a toy).
- Sabotage = Sabotage things in the environment to encourage communication (e.g., give the PWAAC a dried up glue stick during an art project, remove the batteries from a toy, use a barrier/box to hide the objects of the activity).
- Stupidity = Shift the responsibility of making decisions and directing action by pretending not to know what to do.

Use a range of scaffolding strategies to build up successful communication.

- Model communication on the AAC system
- Highlight the target words on the AAC system
- Mask vocabulary on the AAC system to focus attention to the target vocabulary
- Use External Displays with limited vocabulary options (1 – 4 – 8)
- Promote simple 2 – 4 word utterances using vocabulary cards (like the Fokes Sentence Builder) arranged linearly L to R , then repeat the phrase with the AAC system.
- Alter the visual/physical placement of the AAC system to accommodate the person's visual or physical challenges.

Provide Aided Language Stimulation of target words or language structures.

- Provide visual models by talking TO the person using the AAC system.
- Model the language you want the person to say to you.
- Practice using the AAC system upside-down (for when you're sitting across from the person).
- For students with AAC systems with limited vocabulary on an AAC display, use a more robust AAC display as your tool for modeling new vocabulary and language structures.

Promote Learning the Nike® Way – Just Do It!

- Utilize learning through Motor Patterns/Planning/Automaticity by physically assisting accurate selections.
- Limit the number of target words to provide sufficient practice during teaching sessions.
- Watch for "random pointing" where the person just starts pointing at various words on the AAC without real intentionality. Nip that by physically assisting the person, masking non-target words, using highlighting, etc.   Provide only targeted modeling and Aided Language Stimulation to prevent presenting a pattern of pointing that may look random to the PWUAAC.

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Use environmental engineering with additional communication displays throughout the environment to promote activity-specific or location-specific communication.

- To supplement the person's personal AAC system, place similar or additional displays around the environment (e.g., at the computer station, in the bathroom). They can serve as back-up displays if the person hasn't brought his/her display to that part of the environment. They can also provide additional vocabulary unique to that setting (e.g., computer words, toiletries).
- Place descriptive/directing phrases around the room (e.g., what time – by the clock; go out, open it, where do – on the classroom door; turn on, turn off – at the sink, tv, computer, etc.).