



Responding to Communication attempts with AAC

It can be helpful to consider how a young child typically develops language from birth, and what happens that helps them learn to speak.

- They are surrounded by many, many models of others producing speech.
- They have many opportunities to practice making sounds and word approximations.
- Adults respond with natural feedback to young children’s attempts even if these are unclear. They interpret sounds and words as meaningful and respond accordingly.

(Porter and Burkhart, 2010)



Students with complex communication needs also require the same type of opportunities and interactions, demonstrating communication methods they can learn to use. We continue to build our students’ confidence and skills as communicators as we:

- Notice students’ attempts to communicate,
- Interpret these as meaningful,
- Respond

The feedback and opportunities we provide to our students can be integral to developing their skills and understanding of how they can use their AAC system to become more effective communicators. We can be responsive communication partners by:

- Initially responding to any attempt the student makes to communicate using any of their communication methods.
- Giving feedback on what we’re observing and how we’re interpreting it.

This is how the student learns that what they say has an impact on the world around them. When people tune in, listen and respond to what we’re saying it makes us feel important – the same goes for our students using AAC. When students experience success with communication they are more motivated to persevere with further attempts.

Below are some different situations where the way we respond can help build our students' communication skills:

- We can recognise and interpret our students' natural behaviours as attempts to initiate communication and **respond in ways that encourage opportunities for communication and AAC use.**

"You're calling out, have you got something to say?"
(and ensure their device is there)

"You're reaching for your talker, have you got something to say?"
(even if they seemed to just be fiddling!)

- We can interpret our students' natural behaviours as a form of communication and **respond by adding language using their AAC system.** This shows our students how they may use language in their AAC system to communicate this message in future.

Oh you're looking at the ball, do you want to play?"

You're pushing it away, you don't want that

- We can **respond when our students use vocabulary in their AAC device (even if it may appear random) and interpret this as meaningful.** This can be a great learning opportunity to help build students' understanding of how the system works, and that they can influence the actions and responses of others by using the device.

Like, more, it,
more, more

I'll get you some more paint

Chips, chips,
chips, chips...

I like chips,
you have chips in
your lunch today

Even if it's not possible to give the student what they're requesting, at least respond by acknowledging the message. You may even be able to model when it will be an option eg.

computer

"I know you like the computer.
We're reading now, then it's computer



But he just hits the words randomly! She just uses it as a toy!

Students may babble with symbols and explore the vocabulary, which is part of the learning process. Remember, students need to have opportunities to use their AAC device to be able to learn it!

Think about what many of us do when we get a new smart phone, we often press all the new icons to see what they do and learn about its features.



Do you have a student who is repeating words or doing lots of exploring with their AAC device?

Read this great blog post by Carole Zangari for some more thoughts on the topic:

Stimming or Learning: considerations for kids who repeat themselves with AAC. <http://praacticalaac.org/practical/stimming-or-learning-considerations-for-kids-who-repeat-themselves-with-aac/>

The way we respond can help our students develop more purposeful use of their AAC device to communicate more clearly over time.



References

Burkhart, L. J. & Porter, G. (2010). *The Juggling Act: Developing Autonomous Communication with Children who will need to Use Visual and/or Auditory Scanning Access Strategies*. Barcelona: ISAAC Conference Workshop Handout.