

Inclusive & Accessible Communication Environments in Schools

Why Communication Matters

Communication is a basic right. Every user deserves to express their wants, thoughts, needs, and ideas. Communication enables participation in learning and fosters relationships with others.

What Counts as Communication?

Communication is more than spoken words. Users may communicate through body language, facial expressions, gestures, behavior, and communication tools.

Communication tools are often categorized as Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC). AAC can include:

- Low-tech tools (communication boards or books, picture cards, writing)
- Mid-tech tools (voice-output button)
- High-tech tools (Speech Generating Devices)

All methods of communication are valid.

Unrestricted Access to Communication Tools

Communication tools should be:

- Available all day
- Accessible in all environments
- Charged, visible, and ready to use

AAC devices should NOT stay in backpacks. Communication happens everywhere, classrooms, hallways, the cafeteria, recess, the bathroom, and so many other places! If a high-tech device is not available, provide low-tech communication options, like a laminated core vocabulary board.

If you are unsure whether a student should have their device, the answer is yes!

Modeling Without Expectation

Students learn communication the same way all people do. Students need consistent exposure and real-life experience. For students who use AAC, this means they need to see and hear their method of communication happening around them throughout the day.

This looks like:

- **Using AAC while you talk** so students can observe how language is built
- **Modeling communication naturally throughout the day**, not just during structured times
- **Providing frequent, low-pressure opportunities to engage**, without requiring a response

Language development, especially for students with complex communication needs, is a long-term process that depends on repetition, modeling, and trust. Communication should feel like connection and meaningful participation. It is NOT a chore, task, or compliance activity. When we shift away from compliance and toward connection, we create an environment where students feel safe to explore communication at their own pace.

Creating a Supportive Communication Environment

✓ DO

- Provide wait and processing time
- Honor all communication attempts
- Respond naturally
- Keep communication tools accessible
- Assume every user has something to say and can learn to communicate

✗ AVOID

- Taking away an AAC system
- Turning the volume off
- Ignoring nonverbal communication
- Treating communication as work and compliance

✓ Key Takeaways

Every voice matters, no matter the form. Create an inclusive classroom that:

- Honors all forms of communication
- Assumes every user can learn to communicate
- Always keeps communication tools available, if a device is not available, use a low-tech backup and notify the SLP right away!