

Language Learning Through AAC

Learning to use a high-tech AAC device is like learning a new language — it takes time, modeling, and practice. The stages below map how language typically develops, what it looks like at each point, and how communication partners can help.



STAGE 1

Exposure

1

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

- Random or repeated button presses
- Watching others use the device
- Limited intentional communication
- Exploration

WHAT'S BEING LEARNED

- Symbols have meaning
- Button locations
- Communication creates responses
- Early motor planning

PARTNER'S ROLE

- Model frequently
- Respond naturally to all attempts
- Avoid quizzing or pressure
- Treat exploration as valid communication

STAGE 2

Single Words

2

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

- Requests (*more, go, eat*)
- Labels (*car, cat, red*)
- Protests (*stop, all done*)
- Repetition of favorite words

WHAT'S BEING LEARNED

- Cause and effect of communication
- Increased intentionality
- Early vocabulary growth
- Stronger motor plans

PARTNER'S ROLE

- Expand on the user's word
- Model multiple communication functions
- Celebrate communication, not complexity
- Let the user lead

STAGE 3

Word Combinations

3

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

- Two- to three-word phrases (*"more goldfish"*)
- Emerging pronouns (*"I want", "my turn"*)
- Verb + noun combos (*"eat apple"*)

WHAT'S BEING LEARNED

- Beginning syntax development
- Expanding vocabulary
- Combining words to express ideas

PARTNER'S ROLE

- Model phrases and sentences
- Model different communication purposes
- Encourage use across environments



STAGE 4

Expanding Sentences

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

4

- Longer messages
- Questions, comments, and responses
- Emerging grammar (*verb tense, plurals*)
- More communication across settings

WHAT'S BEING LEARNED

- More complex sentence structures
- Broader vocabulary and purposes
- Greater participation in conversations

PARTNER'S ROLE

- Model rich, grammatically correct language
- Encourage conversations across environments
- Allow time for processing
- Prioritize connection over correction

STAGE 5

Flexible language

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

5

- Novel sentences
- Storytelling and recalling experiences
- Humor and abstract ideas
- Repairing communication breakdowns
- Adjusting style by partner

WHAT'S BEING LEARNED

- Strong motor plans for vocabulary
- Flexible sentence construction
- Deeper language understanding

PARTNER'S ROLE

- Engage in meaningful conversations
- Respect autonomy and preferences
- Support vocabulary programming
- Allow time for message generation



Remember:

Progress is not always linear. Not all AAC users follow this sequence and some users, like gestalt language processors, may use scripts or longer phrases before breaking language into smaller units.

