

AAC Classroom Challenges: A Quick Guide

In a school, there are many challenges you may encounter when using AAC with users. Here is a quick guide for some common challenges!

If you notice the user...



Throwing or pushing the device away, or avoiding the device

- Treat this as communication (they are saying “I’m done” or “I don’t like this”)
- Model what they could say: “**ALL DONE**”, “**NO**”
- Use things they like to get them interested again, like “**MORE** cookies” or “**GO** swing!”
- Focus on modeling more without expecting a response



Only uses the device to request

- Model other ways to communicate:
- Comment: “I **SEE** blue”, “**THAT** is **FUN**”
- Protest: “I do **NOT LIKE** that”
- Talk about what you see and feel on the device
- Avoid asking lots of questions



Doesn’t use the device unless prompted to, or looks to adults before responding

- Wait longer before helping
- Model without expecting them to copy or say anything back
- Let communication feel low-pressure
- Say and model the word you want them to use—then move on (pause) → **GO** → continue activity



Uses other forms of communication more frequently, like pointing, gestures, or talking

- Accept any and all communication
- Model on the device: the user points, you model “**GO**”
- Avoid requiring the user to use the device every time



Talks during quiet times or enjoys the device loud

- Teach when it’s time to talk vs. listen
- Use visuals if available to help identify talking vs. listening times or appropriate volumes
- Say and model: “It’s **LISTENING** time”, “Let’s use quiet voice.”
- Never turn volume off completely

If you notice you (or another communication partner)...

✓ Aren't sure how to use the device	• Start simple. Don't worry about full sentences • Pick ONE word on the home page and use it for the whole day • In activities or classes (like art), model just MORE or LIKE
✓ Can't find words to model	• Stay on the home page when possible • Use the search button (ask your SLP if you are unsure where to find this) • Use general words: it, that, go, more
✓ Find navigation confusing	• Give yourself grace, AAC takes time to learn • You will learn it by using it • Ask your SLP, "How are the words organized?"
✓ Feel like you're doing it wrong	• There is no perfect modeling • Focus on one word you do know • Think out loud: "Hmm, maybe circle is in describe. Let's look" • It's okay to make mistakes. Say "oops!" and try again
✓ Feel overwhelmed with goals	• Start small. It is okay to simplify • Use the team as a resource and ask questions • Keep a "cheat sheet" nearby—for example, a sticky note with a word to model

Device or Environment Challenges

✓ AAC device is in the backpack	• Keep the device within reach at all times • Build a routine to take it out when arriving and bring it everywhere • Say: “WHERE are your words? Let’s find those so you can talk!”
✓ Classroom is too fast-paced to keep up with modeling	• Don’t worry about modeling everything • Ask the teacher what the lesson will be ahead of time • Give wait time when you can
✓ AAC is only used in speech therapy	• Remember, communication happens all day, not just in therapy • Everyone can help a user communicate • Use the device during classes, lunch, recess, and transitions
✓ Device is not charged	• Set up a simple charging routine (same time every day) • Use a charging station in the classroom (a specific spot for devices to charge) • Keep low-tech backups, like printed core boards • Send reminders home to charge device if needed
✓ Limited vocabulary available on device	• Write down words the user needs during the day • Share the list with the SLP to help program these words • Focus on words the user does have available, but continue adding to a list of wanted words
✓ Difficult to use in certain places	• Use low-tech supports for different settings, like the bathroom, the locker, etc. • Print and laminate a picture of the user’s home screen to keep in the “hard-to-use areas” • Adjust where the device is placed so the user can see and reach it (or access it with their access method)