

AAC Myths Dispelled (From Special Education Technology (SET) – British Columbia; AAC: A Way of Thinking)

We all approach a challenge with certain assumptions. Often, these assumptions can get us going, but will trip us up at a later date. In order for readers to start their journey towards ‘a way of thinking’, here are some common myths that people have about AAC, and a brief description of what is currently known about AAC.

Myth #1: AAC is only used by people who cannot communicate verbally.

Truth: AAC can be used by a wide variety of communicators. We all augment our verbal communication with gestures, facial expressions and so forth. AAC is useful for children with delayed speech development, and is becoming more commonly used with people who are learning a second language.

Myth #2: The primary goal of communication is to express wants and needs.

Truth: For most people, in most situations, expressing wants and needs is secondary to social expression. One way to think of this is to put yourself into the position of person who uses AAC. If you could only say three things, would they be “I need to go to the toilet”, “I’m hungry”, and “I’m thirsty”, or would they be “Hi, how are you”, “Can we talk?”, and “I love you”? This is not to say that being able to control your environment is not important, but it may not be the most important (or motivating) thing.

Myth #3: Using AAC will delay speech development.

Truth: Studies show that the use of AAC actually improves speech development where possible (Silverman 1995), and it can be argued that it improves language development in all cases. It should be noted that even the most sophisticated voice output communication aid cannot be as efficient or smooth as good speech.

Myth #4: We should wait to use AAC until a person is ready for it.

Truth: Anybody can use AAC. We do not wait to communicate verbally with a typical child until they are ready to talk; rather, we surround them with a wealth of language. The same can be said for a child who uses AAC. We should not wait to introduce other methods of communication until they are ready to use them; rather we should surround them with a wealth of language (verbal, gestural or symbolically based).

Myth #5: We should not overwhelm somebody with access to too many symbols.

Truth: We should provide more symbols than a child can use at one time. Again, if we look at typically developing children, they have access to all the sounds of their language by 6 months of age. They use them appropriately when they are able to. The same can be said for someone communicating with

symbols. If a child is not provided with any more symbols than they have 'mastery' of, then they have no opportunity to practice new symbols in a natural progression.

Myth #6: Somebody who has a VOCA should use it all the time.

Truth: Voice output communication aids are often vital components of a person's AAC system. It is true that they should have access to their device all the time (or almost all the time). But, there are times when it is not practical or necessary. For example, using a VOCA in the bath is not usually a good idea. Communication is in its nature multi-modal; for example, there are many people who use VOCAs in most situations, but not at home with their family.

Myth #7: An AAC system should be a goal for all people who are non-verbal.

Truth: The 'goal' is to have functional communication. An AAC system may be a useful tool towards that end. This distinction, while subtle, can help tremendously towards setting appropriate goals for a student.