

## Alternative/augmentative communication (AAC)

---

### What is alternative/augmentative communication (AAC)?

AAC is a form of communication which supplements spoken communication or substitutes for it. AAC does this either by means of a particular device (assistive communication) or by means of a system – signing or symbols (non-assistive communication). AAC is also broadly divided into high-tech and low-tech communication aids or systems.

**High-tech aids** are usually typewriter- or computer-based aids using a keyboard and visual display, and may have voice. The voice may be real (an actual recording of a person's voice) or synthetic (an artificial voice).

The keyboard may be QWERTY (as on a normal typewriter), alphabetic or display symbols instead of letters. The latter is used for those who do not have literacy skills – the child or adult does not have to be able to read in order to use a communication aid. Many aids with a scanning device can be operated by a single switch for those with very limited movement such as knee, head or eye movements.

It is also possible to vary the number and complexity of the symbols and to combine these to produce phrases and sentences. Most aids can also store a number of phrases and sentences which can be accessed by a single key press.

It is vital that a specialist assessment is made by a professional experienced in AAC before any device or system is recommended, whether it is high or low-tech.

Low-tech aids usually take the form of pointing boards or frames, or small Filofax or dictionary-type aids, all of which can be personalised to meet the client's needs. Again letters, symbols or pictures can be used.

Symbol systems may use pictorial representations (such as Rebus) or abstract symbols (such as Blissymbolics), which are pointed to or indicated on a computer screen.

'Magic' slates and notebooks for writing are another low-tech aid.

Signing systems can be simple, with gestural representation of a word, such as Makaton, or complex including grammatical signs, such as Paget-Gorman or British Sign Language.

### References

**Baumgart, D, Johnson, J, & Helmstetter, E** (1990), *Augmentative and alternative communication systems for persons with moderate and severe disabilities*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes

**Horwood, W** (1988), *Skallagrigg*. Harmondsworth: Penguin

**Nolan, C** (1999), *Under the eye of the clock*. London: Phoenix

**Rush, W** (1986), *Journey out of silence*. Lincoln, NE: Media Publishing and Marketing

**Southgate, T, & Cochrane, G (Eds.)** (1990), *Communication equipment for disabled people*. Oxford: Oxford Health Authority

### Other relevant Glossary Sheets

- Specific language impairment (1)
- Articulation (10)
- Dyspraxia (18)
- Dysarthria (21)

### Other organisations which can help

**ACE/ACCESS Centre**  
 1 Broadbent Road  
 Watersheddings  
 Oldham  
 OL1 4HU  
 Tel: 0161 627 1358

**ACE Centre Advisory Trust**

92 Windmill Road  
Headington  
Oxford  
OX3 7DR  
Tel: 01865 763508/759800

**Makaton Vocabulary Development Project**

31 Firwood Drive  
Camberley  
Surrey  
GU15 3QD  
Tel: 01276 61390

**Paget Gorman Society**

2 Downlands Bungalow  
Downlands Lane  
Smallfield  
Surrey  
RH6 9SD  
Tel: 0134 284 2308

**Royal National Institute for the Deaf**

19-23 Featherstone Street  
London  
EC1Y 8SL  
Tel: 0808 808 0123 (freephone)  
Fax: 020 7296 8199  
Textphone: 0808 808 9000 (freephone)

*Written by Pat Mobley, speech and language therapist,  
with thanks to Elizabeth Auger, specialist language  
teacher*

Community  
Legal Service



**Telephone  
Helplines  
Association**

quality and confidence for callers to helplines

© Afasic 2004

**Afasic**  
2nd Floor  
50-52 Great Sutton Street  
London EC1V 0DJ  
Phone 020 7490 9410  
Fax 020 7251 2834  
Email [info@afasic.org.uk](mailto:info@afasic.org.uk)  
[www.afasic.org.uk](http://www.afasic.org.uk)  
Helpline 0845 3 55 55 77  
(local call rate)

Registered charity no. 1045617