Speech, language and communication are three distinct but related processes. **Communication** is the process by which individuals exchange information, ideas, needs and desires. It needs a sender – to encode the message - and a receiver – to decode the message. **Language** refers to a socially shared code; a conventional system for representing concepts through symbols (eg. words) and rule-governed combinations of these symbols (ie. vocabulary and grammar). **Speech** is the verbal means of conveying a message.

“With access to appropriate AAC systems and early evidence-based AAC interventions, young children with complex communication needs will have the opportunity to maximize their functional communication, language development, and literacy learning, and will be able to attain their full potential.”

*(Light & Drager, 2007, pg. 213-214)*

**DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY COMMUNICATION**

**Preintentional Stage**
Children at the preintentional stage of communication do not yet have the cognitive skills to represent ideas in their minds and to pursue goals through planned actions. They do not deliberately communicate messages to others, however caregivers may assign meaning to their use of facial expression, eye gaze, body movement and vocalisations. For example, a caregiver may interpret the child crying as meaning that they are hungry.

**Intentional Stage**
At this stage, the child’s behaviours are now intentional and directed to another person, but not yet symbolic. That is, they can make someone in their environment do something, but do not express this desire through conventional communication (ie. spoken words).

Examples of communication at this stage are pointing to objects and people, looking at things and reaching while looking.

**Symbolic Stage**
For typically developing children, symbolic communication begins to emerge in the form of spoken words. This symbolic communication occurs following, and in combination with, a period of language modelling by communication partners. For those who cannot communicate through natural speech, conventional sign language or intentional use of AAC symbols (objects or pictures) begin to emerge and, like typically developing children, will only occur following modelling by communication partners.

*This package focuses on children who are at the symbolic stage of communication development.*
We use language to communicate a variety of different messages. Think of all the different types of messages that you regularly communicate. For example, have you recently greeted someone, given an opinion, commented on the results of the football game or told someone about what happened the other day? While it is important that children are able to answer the teacher’s questions, or ask for something that they want, communication should also allow them to develop and enjoy social relationships, learn and share new information and ideas, and express their individuality.

Research (Kent-Walsh & Rosa-Lugo, 2006) has indicated that the child who uses AAC often:

- is a passive communicator
- initiates few interactions
- responds infrequently
- produces limited types of messages
- uses restricted word types and sentence forms

Therefore, when developing AAC systems we need to ensure that we give children access to and encourage them to use vocabulary that allows them to express a wide variety of messages. Burkhart (2010) highlights the following types of communication messages to provide rewarding interactions:

- initiate
- call attention
- greet
- accept
- reject
- protest
- request objects
- share/show objects
- request information
- name
- acknowledge
- answer
- comment
- express feelings
- assert independence
- ask questions
- share information
- relate events
- talk about past
- talk about future
- negotiate
- bargain
- state opinions
- tease
- threaten
- make up stories
- express manners

**KEY POINTS**

- AAC supports children’s language and communication development.
- We communicate for many different purposes and AAC systems should also encourage this.
- AAC can support children at all levels of communication development, but this package focuses on symbolic communicators.

**References**


FIND OUT MORE

About supporting pre-intentional or early intentional communicators....
- Participation Through Communication Guide by Ylana Bloom and Dolly Bhargava
  http://www.e-ility.com/talktogether/ptcg.php or contact (02) 9876 3568 (Innovative Programming Solutions)
- InterAACtion: Strategies for Intentional and Unintentional Communicators
  or contact 1800 888 824 (Scope Victoria)

About communication development...
- Raising Children website - see Connecting and Communicating sections
  http://raisingchildren.net.au/
- Normal Language Development and AAC—handout by Gail M. Van Tatenhove
  http://www.vantatenhove.com/files/NLDAAC.pdf

This handout is part of an information package, funded by a NGCS grant, to assist local teams in supporting children who require augmentative and alternative communication—particularly communication devices. Augmentative and alternative communication, or AAC, refers to other methods of communication people may use when they have difficulty speaking. These methods may supplement what speech they do use or may become the primary form of communication in the absence of speech.

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