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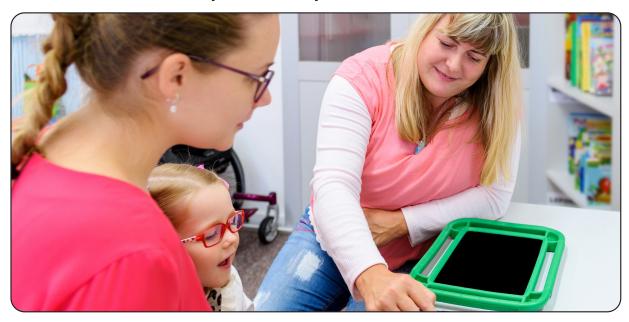
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Augmentative and Alternative Communication: Terms to Know

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Learning about AAC takes time and patience. There are a large number of products, therapy materials, and devices on the market that can make choosing a device or overall communication system overwhelming. Keep in mind that using AAC can be a lifelong journey for some individuals as they grow, develop, and mature. Needs and skill levels change, while for others, AAC is a solution to a communication problem that may lead to verbal expression in the future with no need for AAC. As your child receives education and therapy, you will become aware of new topics and terms. Below are common questions and terms one needs to be familiar with to better understand AAC.

What is PECS vs. PCS?

PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System) is one method of teaching the use of symbol systems (cause and effect). PCS (Picture Communication Symbols) are the actual pictures for communicating.

Low Tech vs. High Tech?

In general terms, low tech refers to anything from simple paper symbols to simple augmentative devices in which you place a paper grid of symbols on the device. High tech refers to computerized augmentative communication devices with multiple pages in which an individual touches the screen or uses a pointer to click on choices.

What is synthesized speech and digitized speech?

Synthesized speech is computerized

speech. Digitized speech is recorded speech. Many AAC devices provide the option of voice choices.

What is a dedicated system?

Dedicated devices are electronic hardware systems designed for communication. For example, a regular laptop computer with common programs for everyday use, as well as an added communication program, is not a dedicated device. A dedicated device is strictly for communication only.

What is a Switch?

Switches are devices used to activate a computer program or AAC device. Children who have severe motor impairments, who cannot press keys or use touch screens, benefit from these. There are a variety of switches on the market allowing an individual to activate a device using body parts such as the foot, knee, fist, or head.

Selecting a system and device is not a simple task. It takes a lot of time, practice, trial and error, as well as a great deal of patience. Many individuals begin using low tech devices with a goal to work toward a high tech device. Others benefit from low tech and will always use low tech based on skill level or needs. High tech devices can be very expensive, so it is wise not to purchase a device prematurely and find it is the wrong one. It can be challenging to get funding for one device, let alone another. Remember that a child develops language skills over years. Trust the professional you are working with to determine the device that works best.

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References

Glennen, Sharon, L. and DeCoste, Denise, C. (1997). Handbook of Augmentative and Alternative Communication, Singular Publishing Group, Inc.

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