



What is an AAC Device?

AAC devices or SGD refer to a class of durable medical equipment specially designed and engineered to enable communication for children and adults with speech impairments. These devices are rigorously tested and approved to be covered by private insurance, Medicaid, and Medicare.

AAC devices not only have robust language systems to allow for effective and efficient communication, but they also provide alternate ways to select letters, words, and messages. For example, an individual can make a selection using their eyes, the tilt of their head to activate a switch, or their finger with the help of a keyguard to isolate the keys.

Some families are first introduced to through an app on a mobile device, while some start directly using an SGD. In some cases, an AAC device may be recommended even if a child has had some success using an app on a mobile device to communicate.

All SGD are specifically designed for the varying and specific needs of individuals with complex communication profiles. The more robust language system, more flexible software, more durable construction, larger screen size, and alternate access options found in an AAC device can make it a more effective long-term solution.

AAC devices provide a voice for the individual which helps the listener understand what is being expressed. Evidence also suggests that pairing the communicated word with voice output may help prompt a child towards spoken language.

“Dedicated” devices are intended for communication purposes only, while other “integrated” devices have features that let the device perform as a computer, access the Internet, and act as an environmental control tool, such as a remote control for a television.

The SLP’s Role in AAC Device Selection

Selecting the appropriate SGD requires an understanding of AAC methodologies and technologies as well as the communicator’s strengths and limitations. That’s why it’s critical to rely on the assistance of an experienced SLP who is knowledgeable about AAC.

Working in conjunction with other team members, the SLP will evaluate your child’s short- and long-term communication needs, potential for language development, and physical capabilities to identify the most appropriate AAC solution and desired outcomes.

If you are pursuing funding from Medicaid or private health insurance, the SLP’s assessment and recommendation of a medically-necessary SGD to meet your child’s daily communication needs will be critical to approval of the funding request.

Additional Resources for Parents

AAC Language Lab
aaclanguagelab.com

Educational resources and teaching aids to support language development, vocabulary acquisition, and effective AAC use.

The Center for AAC and Autism
aacandautism.com

Online resource dedicated to building awareness of the power of AAC to change the lives of children with autism and other developmental disabilities that limit communication skills.

Realize Language
realizelanguage.com

Online service that gives parents and professionals powerful ways to monitor, measure, and maximize a child’s use of an AAC device.

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association
asha.org

The national professional, scientific, and credentialing association for more than 173,000 members and affiliates who are audiologists, speech-language pathologists, speech, language, and hearing scientists, audiology and speech language pathology support personnel, and students.

Explore AAC
Exploreaac.com

Learn the basics about AAC: What it is, who uses it, AAC solutions, and more. A great resource for those wishing to learn more about AAC.

Parent Resources from PRC

PRC has created a series of *AAC & Your Child* guides for parents. Visit our website at prentrom.com or contact your PRC Regional Consultant at (800) 848-8008.

Visit prentrom.com for additional educational materials, to locate a PRC Consultant in your area, or to read inspiring stories of successful AAC users.



About PRC-Salttillo

PRC-Salttillo is the global leader in the development of AAC solutions, including augmentative communication devices, apps, computer access products, and other assistive technology for people with speech and language disorders.

Over fifty years ago, PRC-Salttillo pioneered the use of technology to bring speech and language capabilities to adults and children with disabilities. Since then, the company’s products have enabled children and adults worldwide to achieve spontaneous, independent, and interactive communication regardless of their disability, literacy level, or motor skills.

In addition to powerful AAC devices, PRC-Salttillo provides teaching and implementation ideas, therapy materials, curriculum sequences, funding assistance, and training to speech-language pathologists, special educators, and the families of people who communicate with AAC.



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AAC & Your Child

PARENT GUIDES



Choosing an AAC Device for Your Child

If your child has a diagnosis that makes using speech difficult or impossible, a speech-language pathologist (SLP), assistive technology (AT) specialist, or other professional may recommend an augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) device with voice output.

People with severe speech or language difficulties rely on AAC to learn language, supplement existing speech, or replace speech that is not functional. For example, some children are born with difficulty controlling their tongue, lips, and vocal cords. Others may have difficulties learning speech because of Autism, Down Syndrome or other developmental disabilities. Some individuals may lose the ability to speak due to an injury or disease. AAC

can help all of these individuals say what they want, and help them learn language along the way.

AAC devices, also called speech-generating devices (SGDs) are a voice for people who can’t speak. The person communicates by selecting buttons that may contain prerecorded or synthesized speech containing letters, words, phrases, or sentences.

Individuals worldwide use AAC devices to engage in everyday communication. Communication takes place in the course of their daily activities at home, at school, and in the workplace.

This Parent Guide will help you understand AAC device options and which features are most critical for helping your child achieve their full communication potential.



The First Priority in AAC Device Selection: The Language System

The language system will be one of the most important factors in choosing an AAC device.

A language system is how letters, words, phrases, and sentences are organized in the device's communication software. You may hear other terms for language system such as vocabulary or user area.

Language systems organized with words and phrases may include symbols because children are able to communicate before they are able to read and spell. Some systems may primarily use an alphabet keyboard for communication, most often used by individuals who can spell their thoughts.

Why Pre-Stored Sentences are Not Enough

In both typical and augmented communication, the ultimate goal is the same: Spontaneous Novel Utterance Generation (SNUG). SNUG allows a person to say anything they want at any time, as they would in every day conversation. With AAC, SNUG requires a device that enables access to individual words, word combinations, and commonly used phrases.

The alternative to SNUG in AAC is pre-stored sentences.

While using pre-stored messages can be a fast way to communicate simple requests or commands, it restricts the individual to very limited messages. Seek out a system that supports language development. A system that gives your child access to a well-organized bank of frequently used single words (core words) and word endings such as '+s' and '+ed' allows for SNUG.

Learning to say and combine single words and use word endings enables your child to go beyond using preprogrammed phrases and sentences. Using Combinations of words allows an individual to say new and different things, as well as talk about the past and dream about the future.

Many SLPs recommend selecting a language system that will allow the transition from learning first words to complex communication without changing communication systems or symbols over the course of language development. Evaluate how a system can meet your child's immediate language and communication needs, but also how it can grow with your child.

Once the best language system for your child has been chosen, device options can be narrowed. You then can further narrow the choices to systems that offer required technology features and other desired functions.

What are Core Words?

Core words are the words most commonly used in communication. The 100 most frequently occurring words account for 60% of words communicated. Core words sometimes are not easily represented by a picture on an AAC device, but often are represented by symbols. The location of these symbols on a device needs to be consistent over time so the device user can rely on learned motor plans and patterns for quick access.

Other Features to Consider

Alternate Access Options

AAC devices offer a variety of alternate access methods so individuals with physical limitations can operate and access the letters, words, and sentences necessary for communication. In the field of AAC, access describes the way a person will select or activate components of a communication system.

There are two categories of alternate access methods: **direct selection** and **indirect selection**.

Direct selection methods

allow immediate and direct contact with the device's display. The methods of direct selection are:

- **Touch**, such as with a finger, stylus, or toe. Typically, keyguards or TouchGuides are available to increase accuracy
- **Head tracking** where the head acts as a mouse and is tracked by a module attached to the



device, or using a joystick, trackball mouse, mouse pad, or typical mouse

- **Eye tracking**, with an eye tracking module that detects where an individual is looking on the screen to make a selection

Indirect selection methods are supported by some AAC devices. These devices have special software and hardware to interpret input from a source other than a physical keyboard or touch-screen. The most common indirect selection technique is switch scanning. The user selects the message by activating a switch at the moment the desired word, letter, or symbol is highlighted.

Switches can be controlled by touching or other body movements, using air pressure or motor electrodes. Settings in the software can be configured to meet individual needs.

Types of scanning include:

- **1-switch scanning** (auto or step)
- **2-switch scanning** (hold or step)

Multiple selection methods can enable children with even severe physical limitations to operate and communicate with an AAC device.

Digitized or Synthesized Speech Output

- **Digitized speech output is natural speech that has been prerecorded. The device's entire capacity for speech output is limited to the words, phrases, or messages that have been pre-stored for the user.**
- **AAC devices with synthesized speech translates the user's input into machine-generated speech. The user is not restricted to pre-stored messages and can create an original message using letters, words, or symbols that the device then "speaks."**



Durability & Portability

An AAC device must be durable and rugged to withstand the activities of a child on the go. Additionally, since the device will most likely accompany a child to and from school, therapy sessions, and other destinations, the device should combine portability with durability.

Accessories

Depending on a user's physical abilities and limitations, AAC accessories such as mounts and keyguards can be critical in supporting effective access to and proper positioning of an AAC device.

Screen Size

Screen size can play a vital role in the access of a device. Larger screen sizes may be necessary for those using eye tracking or other alternative access, while smaller screens might be a better fit for someone who is using their hands. Screen size also impacts device weight so smaller screens are often recommended for portability while larger screens may be preferred when mounted.

Device Customization Options

Customizing certain device features to your child's unique access or communication needs is essential. Look for devices that enable easy customization of vocabulary as well as the ability to finely tune the alternate access method.

AAC Device Funding

Private insurance and Medicaid will typically cover the cost of an AAC device if the medical necessity of the device has been justified in an AAC evaluation. Regulations can vary from state to state. Most manufacturers have a funding department and some provide additional support through a national network of regional consultants who can help you and your child's SLP navigate the funding process.

Built-in Therapy and Teaching Tools

Many language systems have a variety of tools to help you teach the system and help the child learn the system. Options may include a way to search for words, a way to temporarily limit the amount of vocabulary appearing at one time, or a way to monitor progress. Examples include Word Finder, Vocabulary Builder™, and Realize Language™.

Progress Monitoring Tools

Tracking how language and communication are developing is important. Data logging that captures what was said and when is a helpful feature built into select AAC devices. This data helps a team determine current functioning as well as plan intervention. Some devices also have web-based analysis tools that track and report progress and communication development over time.

Warranty

Compare return policies, standard device warranties, and your options in extended coverage warranties. The device manufacturer should offer to provide a free loaner device should your child's device require repair.

User Support and Services

Successful use of an AAC device requires a professional support network. While you and your team have the primary role of helping your child maximize the use of the device, support from the device manufacturer is critical.

Select a manufacturer that offers online and in-person device training, toll-free and online technical support, and other online resources for therapists, parents, and teachers. Some companies provide additional support through a national network of regional consultants. These AAC experts offer clinical support and training to device users, families, and support teams.

Helping your child become an independent, spontaneous communicator is a process that can be significantly enhanced with the right AAC device.

