What Are Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) Devices?

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February 9, 2022

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When people hear the term “augmentative and alternative communication” they may not be sure what that means. However, it’s something most of us use without realizing it. Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) can include anything from a thumbs up to a glance across a room. It is formally known as “unaided AAC systems.” It includes your body language, sign language and physical clues. While that works for some, it doesn’t work for all. For patients of Gillette, AAC devices are key in helping them live their day-to-day life.

AAC devices support and sometimes replace speech and writing. Coming in both electronic and non-electronic forms, the goal is to help children and their families communicate. Sometimes, it is as simple as a set of pictures. Communication books and choice boards are effective ways of doing this. In other cases, recorded speech devices, tablets and certain iPad applications are more beneficial. It all depends on the specific needs of the child.

Who Should Use Augmentative and Alternative Communication Devices?

From cerebral palsy to brain injuries and muscular dystrophy, AAC devices can make a world of difference for children diagnosed with various health conditions. Gillette Children’s has a team of experts who can work with patients to ensure they receive the best AAC device.
For kids like Maya Xiong, AAC devices are life-changing. Maya was diagnosed with infantile neuroaxonal dystrophy (INAD) when she was just over a year old. INAD is a rare, genetic neurological disorder that can cause a rapid decline in motor and intellectual skills. Among other things, this diagnosis affects her ability to communicate.

Maya’s two main Gillette therapists, speech-language pathologist, Lisa Schwartz, and occupational therapist, Emily McCarthy, often work as a team. “Gillette is really known for a team approach and letting two therapists co-treat a patient if it’s needed,” McCarthy says.

We Help You Find the Right Device

Schwartz and McCarthy evaluated Maya and determined which augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) device would work best. McCarthy says, “As an occupational therapist I looked at Maya’s physical needs and skills while, Lisa, as a speech therapist, evaluated Maya’s language and communication skills.” The two therapists decided to use an eye-tracking device that uses an infrared camera calibrated to Maya’s eyes to determine which word she’s looking at on an electronic tablet. When Maya looks at a word on her electric tablet, her parents and providers can understand what she wants or needs. It is her way of carrying on a conversation.

As Schwartz and McCarthy illustrate, determining what sort of AAC device will work best for your child is a team effort.

- A speech and language pathologist looks at your child’s speech and communication skills.
- Then, an occupational therapist evaluates your child’s physical needs.
- In cases where seating or mobility equipment is used, a certified seating practitioner helps with equipment-related decisions, seating adjustments and wheelchair modifications.

Parents are highly encouraged to participate in all stages of this process.

After the evaluation is complete, providers come together and decide which AAC device makes the most sense.
This might mean trying various augmentative and alternative communication systems to see which one works best. It also helps to attend speech and/or occupational therapy sessions to work on your child’s skills. As things develop, necessary changes are made based on your child’s needs and technology updates.

We Want a Child To Communicate With the World

Emily McCarthy feels strongly about AAC devices. “Helping a child communicate gives them the opportunity to be social with others. What we really want is to give the child the opportunity to communicate with anybody within their community, within their school, with their therapist or caregiver. What we want is a child who can communicate with the world,” she says.

Lisa Schwartz says, “I want to just empower families and empower these kids to communicate what they want and need.” Schwartz adds that helping children communicate and gain the ability to tell their parents they love them for the first time is rewarding and emotional.

The Gillette AAC team includes speech and language pathologists, occupational therapists, and assistive technology specialists who are experts in their fields. Working closely with you, our providers will test your child’s skills and needs, then recommend programs to help them communicate using both electronic and nonelectronic AAC devices. We also design custom mounts and educate your entire family about effective communication strategies.

To learn more, explore our AAC services page.