

Dispelling the Myth: AAC Devices Do Not Hinder Speech and Language Development

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Background

There is a prevailing myth that augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices impede a child’s natural speech and language development (Blischak et al., 2003). As a result, many families-along with some physicians and clinicians-prefer to “wait and see,” wanting to give natural speech more time to develop. This well-intentioned hesitation, however, often delays the implementation of supports and strategies that could enhance a child’s communication development and long-term success (Park, 2021).

Families may fear that their child will become overly reliant on the device, leading to delays in – or even prevention of – speech acquisition and language development. This fear is often rooted in a “use it or lose it” mindset regarding natural speech (Blischak et al., 2003).

Another common worry among family members is that using AAC will make their child “look different,” increasing the risk of social stigma or exclusion. These fears significantly hinder early intervention efforts and reinforce barriers to communication access.

There is a significant gap in accessible, family-friendly resources available to address and alleviate parents’ concerns about AAC and its impact on speech development. Many parents report receiving little to no information about what AAC is, what devices are available, or how to obtain them. As a result, families often feel left on their own to advocate for their child’s access to AAC devices and support for their use (Morrison & Cruz Cordero, 2023).

Approach

The primary purpose of this project is to directly challenge the widespread misconception that AAC devices impede a child’s natural speech and language development. This initiative solicited input from those with lived experiences in order to counter these assumptions and fears. Specifically, the project sought to develop a video and informational pamphlet designed to dispel common myths about AAC. These resources are intended for public dissemination to promote greater understanding and advocacy.

Why It Matters

The misconception that AAC impedes natural speech and language development often precludes or delays the introduction of a device, yet this misconception is directly contradicted by evidence. Systematic reviews and studies consistently show that AAC use does not decrease speech production; in fact, improvements in speech and/pr language are observed in the majority of children (Jensen et al., 2023).

Dispelling this myth matters because it removes a major barrier to accessing beneficial communication tools that can significantly enhance a child’s quality of life.

Products and Results

While each family’s journey was unique, several common themes emerged across their experiences. As a result, many were resistant to AAC until they saw its positive impact firsthand.

Initial Hesitancy Toward AAC

Some parents expressed early hesitation, fearing that AAC might delay or prevent verbal speech development. As a result, many were resistant to AAC until they saw its positive impact firsthand

The Transformative Power of AAC

AAC provided their child with greater independence in communication and life. AAC revealed previously unseen knowledge and intelligence, as their child could finally express their needs, thoughts, and preferences. Parents reported increased vocalization and overall language development following AAC implementation. AAC allowed families to better understand their child’s thoughts, feelings, and needs.

QR Link to Video:



Products developed through this project include an informational video and brochure designed to support families, physicians, and service providers.

Challenges Before AAC Implementation

Parents experienced significant difficulty understanding when their child needed something. Frustration was common for both parents and their children due to the inability to communicate effectively, resulting in emotional strain and uncertainty.

Communication Methods: Benefits and Limitations

Families viewed the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) as a helpful early tool. However, as their children grew and developed more expansive vocabularies, PECS often became limiting and frustrating due to the time and effort needed to communicate. Transitioning to speech-generating devices (SDGs) led to less frustration and enabled their children to express more complex thoughts.

Crucial Advice for Other Families

Parents consistently emphasized the importance of starting AAC as early as possible. Many reflected that earlier implementation could have significantly accelerated their child’s progress. Families highlighted that communication exists in many forms and encouraged recognizing all modes as valid and meaningful. They also urged others to ignore the judgment or misconceptions from outsiders, emphasizing that AAC is your child’s voice, and every voice deserves to be heard.

Methods

Five parents and/or guardians of children with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities who use AAC devices and have demonstrated improvement in expressive language, whether through spoken or augmentative means, were recruited. All participants were compensated for their contributions.

Data collection consisted of structured interviews with each parent/guardian, guided by a twenty-five-question protocol. All interview sessions were audio- and video-recorded.

The recorded data were qualitatively analyzed to identify recurring themes and key messages related to parental experiences and perceptions of AAC use. Selected segments were compiled into a publicly available video, showcasing real-life stories to help other parents better understand the benefits of AAC.

Notable quotes from the interview were featured in an informational pamphlet, which provides a concise summary of research findings, select quotes, and a QR code linking to the final video.

References

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Acknowledgements

A heartfelt thanks to Nelly, Kristin, Shelvía, Cory, and Kristinia for sharing their journeys with AAC. Their knowledge and insight will provide valuable education for future parents.

Appreciation to Jordyn Gum, Digital Communication Specialist at the Center for Disabilities Studies, for her assistance with filming and editing video footage.