



# Communicating with a Person who uses AAC

People who use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC)\* have different ways to communicate. These differences are based on the person's individual motor, sensory, perceptual, literacy, cognitive, social and linguistic capabilities as well as his/her access to appropriate education and communication services and equipment. Most people who use AAC use a variety of communication systems and they may choose to use different systems with different people depending on the familiarity of the topic or the person with whom they are communicating. Some people who use AAC are independent communicators in that most people with whom they communicate can understand what they are communicating. Other people who use AAC require someone who knows how they communicate to facilitate their interactions with people who are less familiar with them.

In the following guidelines, the person using AAC is referred to as the client.

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## General Guidelines

- Find a quiet room
- Speak directly to the client, not to the person who may be accompanying them
- Use everyday vocabulary and define jargon
- Do not speak loudly, slowly or in a condescending manner
- Find out how the client communicates (see communication passport [www.accpc.ca](http://www.accpc.ca))
- Give the client time to communicate. Using an AAC system takes more time than speaking
- If you are short on time and cannot communicate with the client, be honest and make an appointment for when you do have time
- While Yes/No type questions are often fastest, they are most leading and most restrictive
- When using open questions (i.e. what, when where, why, who and how), ensure that the person has access to his/her AAC system
- Always ask the client, if he/she wants someone to facilitate his /her communication with you.

Please note that even if you can understand how the client communicates, it is helpful to have someone else support the client's communication so that you can focus on the topics being discussed

- Ask the client if he/she requires extra time and support in understanding the issues being discussed. Consider engaging a communication facilitator for this purpose

## If the Person is using a Display

Ask the client to show you how he/she points to items on the communication display. Some people use a finger, others a thumb or a knuckle. If necessary, ask the client if you can read about how he/she communicates and look for directions either on the front of the communication display or the tray on the wheelchair.

- Say each word or letter selected out loud so that the client knows you have the correct word.
- Say the words in the order that the client points to them.

- Put the words/letters together when the client is finished pointing.
- Do not interrupt when the client is in the middle of conveying a message.
- Write down the words the client is communicating as this often helps in remembering long messages.

### If the Client is using a Device

- Ask the client where you should sit or stand. Some people who use devices prefer to prepare a message and then speak it out. Others prefer you to read the message on the device screen.

### If Client's Speech is Unclear

A client who chooses to use natural speech as his/her primary means of communication and whose speech is difficult to understand may use speech supplementation strategies when his/her speech is not understood. Some clients may want someone who knows them well to “interpret” what they are saying.

- Tell the client when you cannot understand his/her speech.
- Find out what strategies the client uses when not understood (i.e. slowing rate of speech, showing first letter of word on a display etc.)

### Communication Breakdowns

A breakdown in communication can occur if the client does not understand the terminology that you are using. It can also occur if the client has reduced language skills and has difficulty understanding concepts, vocabulary etc. A communication facilitator may be required to support the client in understanding what is being discussed.

Breakdowns in expressive communication may occur if you do not know how the client selects

items on his/her communication system; if you are unfamiliar with the client's body language, gestures and facial expressions; if the client does not have the words he/she needs to communicate the intended message and, or the client uses key words that do not make complete sentences. In such situations, a communication facilitator is required.

### Using a Communication Facilitator

If you or the client, experience any concerns when communicating, you should discuss the option of engaging someone who can assist the client in communicating with you.

- Ask the client to show you how he/she communicates Yes and No.
- Using Yes and No questions, ask the client if there is someone that he/she trusts who can assist in communicating with you. Be aware that an offender might be someone who knows the client well. Ensure that the client chooses the person who will assist him/her.
- If the client does not have someone to support communication, or if the nature of the legal matter requires a facilitator who is unknown to the client, ask the client if you can contact a local AAC clinic or disability organization to find someone who could assist. See list of resources on [www.accpc.ca](http://www.accpc.ca))
- Ensure that you review the role of the communication facilitator with both the facilitator and the person who uses AAC. See information on communication facilitation on [www.accpc.ca](http://www.accpc.ca))

### Resources

[www.accpc.ca](http://www.accpc.ca) - Equal Justice Project<sup>1</sup>

\* Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) refers to communication systems that people use to communicate. AAC includes picture, word and/or letter boards and voice output devices. People use AAC systems in different ways.

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<sup>1</sup> Resources for Legal Professionals