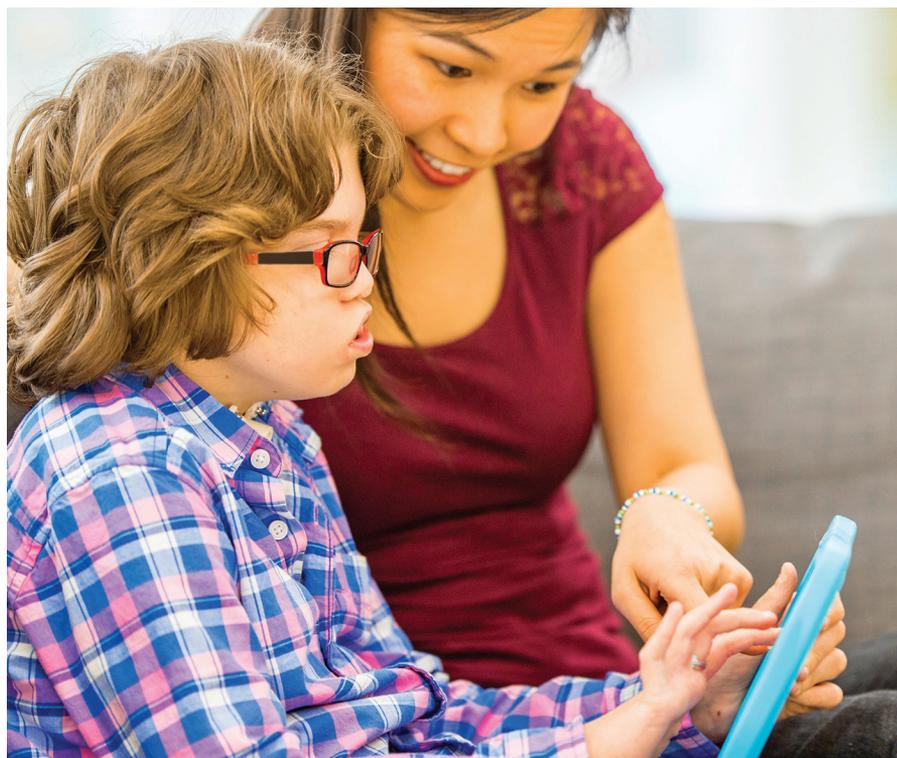# Encourage Students to Use AAC by Supporting Communication Partners

Help embed AAC use into a student's daily routine through close work with teachers, paraeducators and families.

BY CAROLE ZANGARI

"I wish Lily would use her AAC to do more than ask for things."

"Jayson has a speech-generating device but he doesn't really use it outside of therapy."

"How can I get Marcus to use his 'talker' when I'm not in the classroom to support him?"

Allowing students with little or no functional speech a way to say whatever they want to say, whenever they want, to anyone of their choosing is an ambitious goal. This is exactly what speech-language pathologists hope to accomplish with augmentative and alternative communication (AAC).

The path to reach this lofty goal is marked by twists and turns, hills and valleys. Often, students using AAC try several different approaches as school teams work to identify specific tools and technologies that generate the most success.

For example, Lily, age 7, started with choice boards and the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) as a preschooler. She used those tools primarily to express

wants or needs. In her inclusive kindergarten classroom, she tried an AAC app with a basic grid display on a mobile tablet and made measurable progress with it. However, Lily's team felt the AAC app lacked depth, so they switched her to a more advanced version.

When Lily's progress remained slow, the team tried a different AAC app with a new symbol set, layout and lexicon at the start of first grade. At the same time that Lily was learning to use the tool to express her thoughts and needs and demonstrate her academic abilities, she faced many new experiences—a new teacher, new classmates and a new routine. Students like Lily rely on the educational team to support their communication learning through all these changes.

As SLPs, we shoulder much of the responsibility for helping school staff facilitate AAC use during the day. What are some ways we can support key communication partners—teachers, paraeducators and families—and help them use strategies to facilitate AAC learning?

Access to AAC

Communication partners first need easy access to the tools and technologies they're asked to facilitate. SLPs can ensure everyone on a student's team can access the

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student's specific AAC tools—especially when they change.

For Marcus, who uses the CoughDrop app on an Android tablet, his SLP made sure his teacher and family could access Marcus' account to create regular back-ups of customized pages, view data on his usage and participate in team messaging. Additionally, the SLP printed and laminated his screens for each team member. She also connected his teacher with assistive technology specialists who helped project the app onto a smartboard for interactive group lessons.

Training for AAC

Some AAC team members, including the SLP, need training on students' specific AAC technologies or strategies. Whatever students use—PECS, pragmatically organized dynamic display (PODD) books, a speech-generating device (SGD) or apps—SLPs and other team members using these tools need online or in-person training so they can program, customize and back up students' AAC apps or devices.

Many SLPs also want more training on strategies to help their students use these tools and technologies to succeed in school, at home and in the community.

Fortunately, SLPs can access a number of free training resources. Here are some of the more comprehensive AAC training materials to explore.

- **The ImPAACT Program:** Developed by SLPs Cathy Binger and Jennifer Kent-Walsh, this research-supported approach provides the foundation for several training programs. The eight-step program focuses on teaching SLPs to work with

students and their communication partners.

- **Power:AAC Modules:** SLP Gail Van Tatenhove created a set of learning modules on AAC implementation for PaTTAn. Each module includes a video, handouts, pre- and post-tests, and other resources.

- **Model as a MASTER PAL Series:** This 11-part series covers basic intervention strategies and practices for communication partners of early AAC learners. SLPs can work through the materials on their own or use them to present a sequence of trainings to teachers, paraeducators and families. Created by SLP Tabi Jones-Wohleber, this series is free and includes slides, speaker notes, handouts, video suggestions and activity ideas.

Support on AAC

As SLPs know, it can be challenging to put our best intentions into action, particularly when caseloads are high. To make AAC implementation easier, write IEP goals with supportive AAC strategies. For Marcus, goals include

phrases that specify particular strategies: "Given consistent aided language input, Marcus will …" or "Following descriptive teaching, Marcus will …." Lily's goals include conditions for implementation: "at least three times per activity" or "in five out of seven class periods."

Regardless of a communication partner's background or role, SLPs are ideally suited to support and understand the time and effort needed to embed AAC tools and strategies into daily routines, informal interactions and planned lessons. We can encourage and offer gentle accountability or recognition of team members' efforts. We can also track our own use of supportive strategies and see how it changes over time. ↻

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Cathy Binger presented on using iPads for AAC at the 2019 annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science 2019. Check out a podcast on her presentation on the Science magazine website.