Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC) – Communication Partner Training

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Objective:

Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC) offers many individuals the ability to communicate wants, needs and ideas when oral speech abilities are impeded or precluded. Individuals with various disabilities and diagnoses, such as cerebral palsy, Down syndrome and autism spectrum disorder, may find that an AAC system enhances their communicative competence (Light, McNaughton & Caron, 2019).

Communicating with AAC, like all communication, requires at least two people working together to be successful. Someone must work as a sender to portray a message and another person must work as a receiver to understand the message. When communicating with someone who uses AAC, the communication partner may need to use certain communication strategies or add additional steps to make communication successful. However, without specific instruction, the communication partner may negatively impact communication by using practices that provide few opportunities for communication or they may dominate the conversations. This can lead to high levels of dissatisfaction and device abandonment in those who use AAC (Kent-Walsh et al., 2015).

This project was designed to address these potential AAC communication pitfalls by creating a comprehensive training that could be utilized by a variety of individuals in the lives of those who use AAC - from parents of children who use AAC to healthcare workers. To accomplish this, a literature review was performed to examine what the current literature reports as effective AAC communication partner trainings and what those who use AAC want their communication partners to know. This was integrated with interviews about the personal experiences of those who have worked with individuals who use some form of AAC.

Methods:

This research project was two-part: first, to identify what communication partner trainings or what knowledge may improve the overall communication interaction; second, to examine what current strategies or concepts were being endorsed as effective for communicating with someone who uses AAC.

To accomplish this, the online PubMed database was utilized with the search terms "AAC Communication Partner" and filter settings set to include meta-analyses and systematic review articles. Additionally, the publishing year was set to include results from the past ten years. AAC is always evolving and changing, as are the methods in which instruction can be provided;

therefore, the most up to date information was included. Additionally, an online search engine was utilized to look up what was being endorsed as best practice by reputable online sources such as AAC device manufacturing companies and the American Speech-Language-Hearing Associations (ASHA).

Results:

The training created was designed to be as universally applicable and comprehensive as possible. However, it is crucial to remember that AAC and communication are highly individualized. No one training is a perfect fit for all people or all AAC systems. Therefore, communication partners should collaborate with the individual who uses AAC whenever possible to ensure that the conversation is effective and enjoyable for both parties involved.

Research shows that effective AAC Communication Partner Trainings include information that addresses the following components: understanding AAC, collaboration, conversation initiation, conversation maintenance, turn taking, choosing/changing conversation topics, repairing communication breakdowns, and general communication tips and etiquette. The following concepts are examples of included training topics that are universally applicable to any AAC communication:

Use Patience –
- Allow people who use AAC time to process and respond.
- Present one topic or one question at a time.
- Technology is imperfect at times and that includes technology relates to AAC systems. A high-tech AAC device may not be working as properly and as timely as we would like.

Asking is the Best Policy –
- Ask if you want to or need to move an AAC system. Respect their wishes if the person says no.
- Ask if they would like assistance during communication (e.g., if they would like you to try to fix a communication breakdown).
- Ask if you can look at their system (e.g., tablet screen) while they are communicating.

Follow Their Lead –
- Look at the individual that is talking – not others who may be present (e.g., parent, care giver).
- Both parties can ask questions and make comments. Too many questions can be overwhelming.
- Let them set the pace for the conversation.
- Don't assume (e.g. desire to communicate, language ability, etc..,). Your assumptions may be incorrect and allowing those assumptions to inform your decisions may lead to communication that is unsuccessful or unenjoyable.

Conclusions:

The way you go about these components (e.g. how you decide on a conversation topic) may look different depending on the wishes and needs of the individual as well as the device or system they are using. To combat some of this variety and fluctuation, an AAC communication partner should remember to be patient, ask first, and follow their lead.