10 Tips For Using Your Ipad as An AAC Device

A practical guide for parents and professionals
10 Tips for Using Your iPad As an AAC Device

Introduction

The iPad continues to provide innovative ways to make communication and language skill development more effective for learners with cognitive language disabilities such as autism. As the tools continue to improve, caretakers also NEED to learn how to properly introduce and implement them in a variety of different settings. In this practical guide, we will show you 10 tips to successfully implementing an augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) app for your child or student.

AAC can be extremely helpful for individuals with speech or language limitations by first supplementing verbal speech, and then allowing the learner to learn and model language over time to eventually gain verbal speech and no longer require an AAC device. Everyone has had to learn how to communicate, typically taking years to accomplish during infancy and early childhood. Children learn to communicate through imitation, repeated exposure and reinforcement of their communicative attempts. Communication goes through a series of stages, starting during early infancy with unintentional, reflexive behaviors, and move on to conventional, symbolic communication, typically speech.

Children who use AAC devices are encouraged to increase their nonverbal and verbal communication. With the aid of AAC device, children are less likely to feel socially isolated or become frustrated because they cannot express themselves. Research has shown that a new breed of AAC called visual scene displays (VSDs), can be especially helpful for emerging communicators as it provides a more intuitive way to communicate and learn language using photos from the learner’s own environment. AAC also incorporates traditional methods where learners can construct sentences using a grid of symbols or photographs.

AAC is not meant to replace speech but rather enhance and develop it. This guide will show you how to get the most out of your AAC app.

“For people without disabilities, technology makes things easier. For people with disabilities, technology makes things possible.”

(Bryant & Bryant, 2002).
**TIP# 1**

Always have device CHARGED, TURNED ON and AVAILABLE.

It is important to think of an AAC device as the voice of the person using it. Just like a person’s voice, the device should always be available and ready to use. Therefore, ensure that your AAC device is charged, turned on and within reach of the learner.

Here are some tips for extending the battery life of your iPad:

- **Turn off Wi-Fi and cellular data.** Your iPad drains battery power when searching for and attempting to connect to the nearest Wi-Fi or cellular network tower, so if you’re not planning on using Safari or apps that require these features, shut them off.

- **Turn off or decrease the timing for data fetching.** Data that are updated regularly include email notifications and RSS feeds. Go to “Settings,” Tap on “Mail, Contacts, Calendars” and go to “Fetch New Data.” Tap “Manually.”

- **Keep your software or app up-to-date at all times.** Apple recommends updating regularly because engineers look for new ways to optimize battery performance and typically pass these on via software updates.

- **Tone down the brightness.** It goes without saying that the brighter the screen, the more battery power your iPad consumes. Turn down the brightness to a setting that looks right.
TIP# 2
GUIDED ACCESS:
Helping your learner stay focused on a task while he is using his iPad as a communicative device.

Guided access is a feature that allows you to limit your device to operate a single app at a time while also allowing you to control various features of the app. This allows your child or student to stay focused when other areas that aren’t relevant to his or her learning may interfere, or areas where an accidental gesture might cause a distraction are disabled. This includes disabling the home button on the iPad.

To enable guided access, go to: Settings > General > Accessibility > Guided Access.
Next, go to your AAC app to start your guided access session:

OPEN APP > TRIPLE CLICK home button > ADJUST settings & click START

Disable app controls and areas of the app screen: Circle any part of the screen you want to disable. Use the handles to adjust the area.

To ignore all screen touches: Turn off Touch.
Often times individuals who use AAC are able to respond to questions using gestures or other non-verbal methods that are understood by the parent or caretaker. Additionally, there are many opportunities for communication that are not taken advantage of by caretakers because they already know what the AAC user is going to communicate. This leads to lost communication opportunities. You should always expect communication from the learner in order to help them learn and practice communication. Therefore, you should always expect the learner to communicate whenever the opportunity arises. By using AAC, you can motivate and teach your learner to use language effectively to initiate greetings, request attention or make a comment.

Often times, communication may be difficult for your learner causing him or her to avoid communication whenever possible. You should be firm in promoting communication in various settings. For example, if your learner wants to eat something specific or perform an activity you should expect them to communicate a request. If your learner is unable or unready to do so, you should assist the learner in making the request on an AAC device or model the request on the device yourself. Expecting communication requires that the device is always available. That means that the device is available at home, school, workplace and out in the community at all times. Look into the iPad mini as a more portable alternative to the iPad.
TIP# 4
PAUSE & WAIT..(& PROMPT):

PAUSE and WAIT for response or interaction (Count 10 before intervening).

Many times, a learner is able to communicate using an AAC device when they are given enough time to do so. Parents and caretakers will often be quick to prompt AAC users by guiding their hands or showing them what button to press. This prevents a potential communication opportunity and actually discourages speech by making the learner feel as though they are not fast enough and teaching them that if they don’t communicate it will be done for them.

When expecting communication from the learner, you should count 10 seconds before assisting and prompting the user. This waiting period often acts as a prompt in and of itself and can let the learner know you are expecting them to communicate. It also gives the learner the time he or she may need to process the information they need to communicate.
TIP# 5  
CONTROL ACCESS:

Control access by keeping desired item out of reach and always in your control. (Put the desired items in a clear bin or bag where your learner can see the item). Have the learner request for the desired item using the device before giving them the item.

If the learner has easy access to all of his or her favorite items, then he or she has no reason to ask for them. For children, you can control the environment by keeping desired items out of reach, somewhere where the child will not be able to have unlimited access to the item. For example, keeping toys, games, or even treats out of reach will encourage the learner to communicate to get what he or she wants.

Note: If the child is used to always having access to his or her favorite things, it is likely that you will meet resistance when he or she is required to work for these items. This may result in an increase in crying or tantrums. Consult with a speech-language pathologist or behavior analyst to determine which AAC strategies are appropriate for your child to easily replace crying and tantrum behaviors. Remember to view things in your child's perspective, understand that it is what YOUR CHILD wants to say, not what YOU want him to say. Understanding that will help ease your child's frustration when trying to communicate.
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**TIP# 6**

**BE THE MODEL**

Use the device to communicate with your learner. They will learn how to use it by watching you do it first.

If your learner is working on using an AAC device to communicate, it is important that you and other communication partners present on a daily-basis model using the AAC device in real life situations. Aided Language Input (ALI) is the strategy of modeling language by activating or pointing to key words or symbols on the AAC app. Modeling how to point to symbols or images to make requests or understand a directive is a great teaching tool to show the learner how to communicate. For example, set up a scenario where you and another family member are acting out how to follow a directive such as ‘washing your hands.’ Have the family member gesture to the visual AAC support such as a visual scene representing the directive “wash your hands” and then model the actual activity. In this scenario, the learner will see you using the AAC device and hear the communication going on between the two models. When you model using the visual support, it not only helps demonstrating how to appropriately use the support, but also shows that it is okay to communicate using AAC. Another benefit of modeling is it allows the caregiver to become more familiar with the AAC device and allows for recognition of missing words, symbols or hotspots needed to meet the learner’s daily communication needs. Modeling also allows time for the caretaker to think and pause, which is important for new communicators.
TIP# 7
THINK ALOUD:

THINK ALOUD when having trouble locating vocabulary or using a device. Express your frustration by saying something like..."Where is that word?" or "Why isn’t this working?"

When the learner is unable to find a word or phrase in the visual scene or grid-based sentence builder, try to ease their frustration by helping them think aloud. Express frustration FOR them by saying, “Where is that word” while patiently waiting for them to locate the photo, symbols or hotspots that he or she is trying to find to communicate. By doing you are following your learner’s communication lead or interest, which can ultimately lead to language expansion.
**TIP# 8**

**LANGUAGE EXPANSION:**

Use the strategies of: RECASTING, SCAFFOLDING, EXPANSION.

“Recasting” is another form of modeling. This occurs when you modify the learner’s utterances by rephrasing what he or she has said by adding new or different grammar or word meanings to the word or phrase to increase language variety the learner hears.

“Scaffolding” is a way in which you as a caretaker can help the learner build upon prior knowledge by integrating a new concept or skill using verbal and visual strategies. Scaffolding helps your learner add vocabulary, language concepts, or functional communication to his or her repertoire. It supports information beyond the level of what the learner can do alone. It is also a good way to help the learner maintain and extend conversations. Scaffolding is generally a temporary support until the job or activity is completed. Use visual and verbal aids to guide the learner to acquire new communication and language information. Use “think aloud” types of narration to provide new information.

You can use “Expansions” or “Add a Word” strategy to help add a new word to the learner’s natural speech. There is no requirement that the learner repeat the expansion of the word or phrase, but it is likely at some point after your learner will use a longer utterance as long as the expansion is a consistent new word or phrase. Refer back to this strategy on Tip #4 for prompting your learner through this step. Use “think aloud” types of narration with the AAC app to provide new linguistic information.
TIP# 9

MEANINGFUL FEEDBACK

Postive reinforcement: going beyond saying “good job.”

Positive reinforcement goes a long way when your learner makes attempts at using the AAC app. There needs to be specific and meaningful feedback that goes way beyond praise. While reinforcement increases desired behaviors, it will also motivate the individual to learn more language.

It is important for reinforcement to always occur immediately after a communication attempt. Reinforcement should also be related to the item related to communication attempt, especially for requests. For example, if your child requests “candy,” it is important to reinforce them with a piece of candy and not just “good job.” Any failed attempts in honoring reinforcement may lead to a decrease in the desired behavior. By providing immediate and meaningful feedback, you are going beyond just saying “good job” but are actually providing the learner with the reinforcer they requested. Providing the learner with anything other than the desired reinforcer may not actually function as a reinforcer to increase the desired behavior.

Reinforcement should also occur as naturally as possible. There are many instances where we need to provide specific reinforcement for a skill. For example, provide a small reinforcer (a highly preferred edible) to your learner for opening or turning on the communication device to attempt to communicate. Every time you reinforce your learner for interacting with the device, you are increasing the likelihood that your learner will make future initiations with the device.
MEANINGFUL LANGUAGE ACTIVITIES

In other words: Make learning FUN

There is nothing more dreadful than making communication a chore. Learners of all ages interact most when you can make using the AAC app as a communication tool a “fun experience.” Use real experiences to model AAC and to practice communication using your AAC device. Don’t make this wonderful learning experience with your learner a “chore” or a “task.” Look into your daily interests and activities such as eating, playing games, making cookies, bathing, going to the park, singing, dancing, or preparing for a holiday to find endless opportunities to practice communication and requesting in a natural and fun manner. Activities that are especially fun for the learner provide a perfect platform for teaching AAC app use. You can even make cleaning fun for your child or student, be creative!
Autismate provide many of the vocabulary building and text-to-speech features of Alternative and Augmentative communication (AAC) devices at an affordable price.

If you are interested in learning how you can get the most out of using Visual Scene Display apps, sign up for our FREE Webinar while spots are still available!!

Sources:

