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Augmentative and alternative communication - support for people with severe speech disorders

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Abstract

Frequently, a child with severe disabilities is in an early stage of communication development, which is a disadvantage compared to the chronological age. Although the child may display a repertoire of some early communication behaviors, it is possible that because of the nature of the disability (motor, sensory, cognitive), the caring adults can not or do not know how to respond to these behaviors. Moreover, when adults try to respond, it may happen that their signals can not be interpreted by the child. As a result, the child can not acquire the necessary understanding that would enable him to make the cognitive leap from unintentional to intentional communication. In these situations, the most important is that the family or carers get advice from specialists to learn how to become aware of and respond to any of the child's attempts to communicate. Therefore, whenever a child's speech does not develop normally or he can not communicate effectively through speech due to pre-existing conditions, it is recommended for him to receive an augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) support as soon as possible. Even when it can not be clearly established whether a child will ultimately develop normal speech (and often we are faced with this situation), it is better for him to learn an alternative communication system until the emergence of speech is observed.

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1. Introduction

Some people with disabilities can not use speech as a primary means of communication and are forced to employ other specific techniques. The idea behind "augmented communication" is to make use of all the available abilities to compensate for the impairment of verbal communication. With technology that is constantly developing, new opportunities open up for people with disabilities that allow them to achieve an increasingly better level of

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functional communication. In the last five decades, but more prominently in 1980, international experts in diverse fields, such as the field of special education (teachers dealing with students with severe disabilities and autism), speech disorders therapy, occupational therapy and biomedical electronics engineering, have all made considerable efforts to find and develop systems and methods for nonverbal communication.

Nonverbal means of communication can be defined as "coding and messaging procedures without encoding these phonemes directly into the vocal tract" (Bridgman, 1927). Thus, any encoding and transmission of messages that does not take place with direct production of sounds by the source may be classified as non-verbal means of communication.

All people use augmentative communication and daily we may observe persons using this mode of communication around us. It is a way to communicate without speaking. Every day we use gestures, facial expressions, body attitudes, shopping lists, notes that help us convey certain messages. The augmentative and alternative communication phrase encompasses a wide range of adapted communication methods.

Alternative and augmentative communication (AAC) refers to all the methods and means of communication designed to assist / replace speech (or / and writing) when these are affected. Augmentative communication indicates communication methods that can be used to accompany an impaired speech for improving transmission and message understanding, and thus improving communication itself. Alternative communication relates to methods and means of communication used to completely replace speech (or / and writing) when it can not be produced.

In line with the position of ASHA (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association) from the annual publication of the Association (ASHA, 1991), AAC intervention is multimodal, so that it appeals to the individual communication ability as a whole, including any residual speech or vocalization, gestures, signs or other means of sustaining communication.

An augmentative and alternative communication is "an integrated group of components, including the symbols, communication aids, strategies and techniques used by the individual to support communication" (ASHA, 1991, p.10), this definition emphasizing the use of multiple modalities and components in the communication process.

Alternative and augmentative communication subsumes any device, system, method, which improves the ability to communicate for a person with a communication disability. While AAC is often used to refer to formal communication devices and communication systems such as the manual signs, communication boards and speech generating devices, it also includes less sophisticated modes of communication such as vocalizations, facial expressions, idiosyncratic gestures.

Alternative and augmentative communication is especially needed when a child acquires speech normally and there is a significant delay in development, but it can and should not simply become a substitute for how the child currently communicates. AAC is needed to support communication and to replace only the items that are unintelligible, socially unacceptable or dangerous for the subject or those around him. Ideally, alternative and augmentative communication includes more than one system of communication, so that the child may use the most appropriate depending on the people he communicates with, the circumstances and the activities he is involved with. Very often, one of the means of communication in an AAC program is speaking itself. So during AAC interventions, subjects will be encouraged to use various methods and appropriate means in various situations and with different communication partners. This follows the principles of total communication strategies and it implies that AAC users will use multiple methods of communication to achieve the most effective communication possible (Anne Warrick, 1998).

Alternative and augmentative communication is a kind of intervention that uses manual signs, communication boards with symbols, devices that produce synthesized voice, all these whilst trying to incorporate all remnant communication skills of the child. These skills can include any remaining speech or vocalization capacity, gestures, manual signs, ability to use communication boards and electronic devices for synthesizing voice.

Some children do not have any conventional way to communicate and express their needs and desires, and sometimes they do that in a socially unacceptable manner, for example, aggressive, destructive or self-stimulating actions. Alternative and augmentative communication can replace these unacceptable forms with conventional means of communication. In the same time, alternative and augmentative communication helps to increase access to learning activities and thus improves cognitive development of the individual.

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