

Integrating AAC in the Classroom: Tips and Tools for Successful Implementation

September 2, 2026
7:00-8:00 EDT

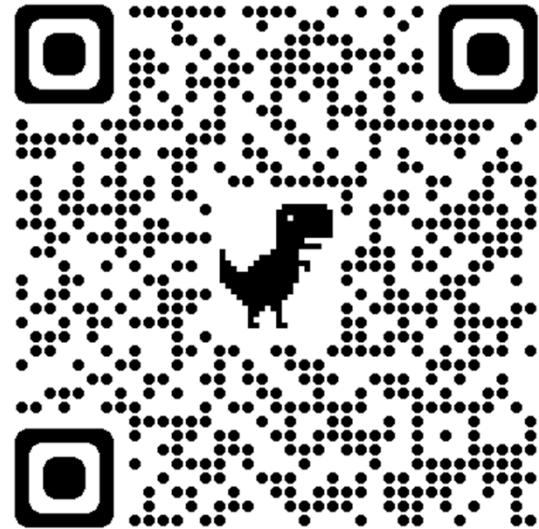
Presented by: Betsy Caporale and Sharon Redmon
Facilitator: Amy Bereiter



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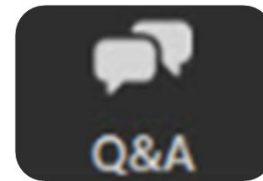
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WEBINAR

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Title: Using the Communication Matrix Assessment to Build Consensus

Presenters: Deirdre Galvin-McLaughlin, Gloria Rodriguez-Gil, Jill Tullman, Becky Eidelman, and Eric Sanders

Date: September 17, 2025

Time: 7:00-8:00 p.m. EDT

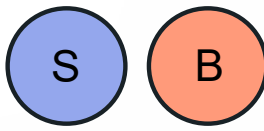
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Integrating AAC in the Classroom: Tips and Tools for Successful Implementation

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September 2, 2026

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Presented by:

*Betsy Caporale, M.S., CCC-SLP
Speech-Language Pathologist,
AAC/AT Specialist*

*Sharon Redmon, Ph.D., Assistant SPED
Professor, Sped. Teacher, AT/AAC Specialist*

Learning Outcomes

Determine

- the skill sets of a student with complex communication and learning needs using authentic, dynamic measures.

Select

- appropriate AAC/AT tools and strategies and learning activities for a student based on current skill levels.

Develop

- an AAC/AT Implementation Plan for a student with complex communication and learning needs.

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Considerations for Students with Complex Communication and Learning Needs

Physical

Cognitive

Medical (including vision, hearing)

Behavioral

Social/Emotional

Cultural

Other?

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Observations of student:



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Document

1. What seems to motivate the student?

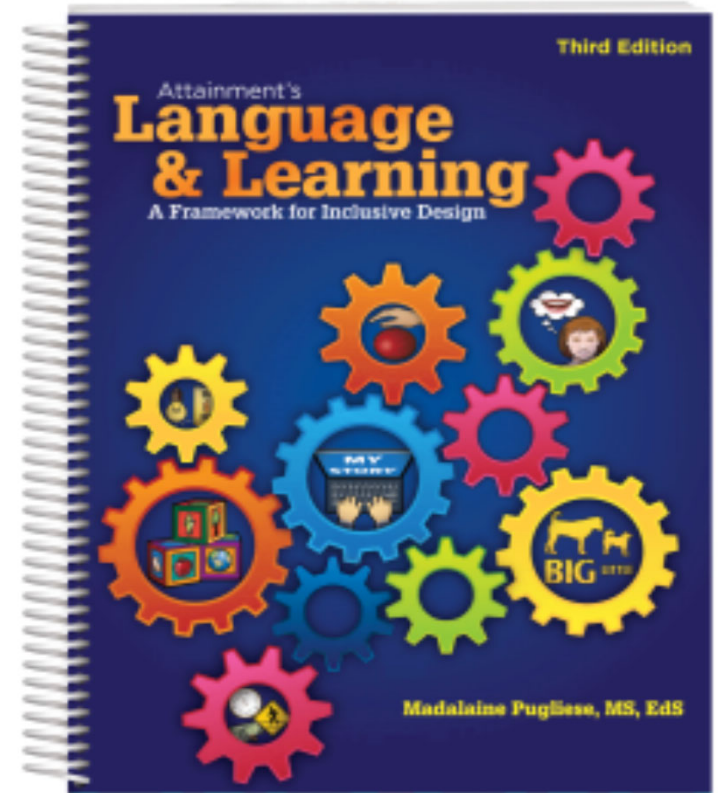
2. When is student most engaged?

3. What kinds of maladaptive behaviors are exhibited and when?

4. What might the student be communicating through behaviors?

The Stages Framework

- Addresses language and cognitive development
- Stages are competency based
- Alternative assessment for students with cognitive and language challenges
- Helps determine appropriate learning tools and activities based on the unique needs of the student
- Appropriate learning stage is where student is challenged, but not frustrated



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Seven Stages :

Cause and Effect

Language Readiness

Emerging Language

Early Concepts

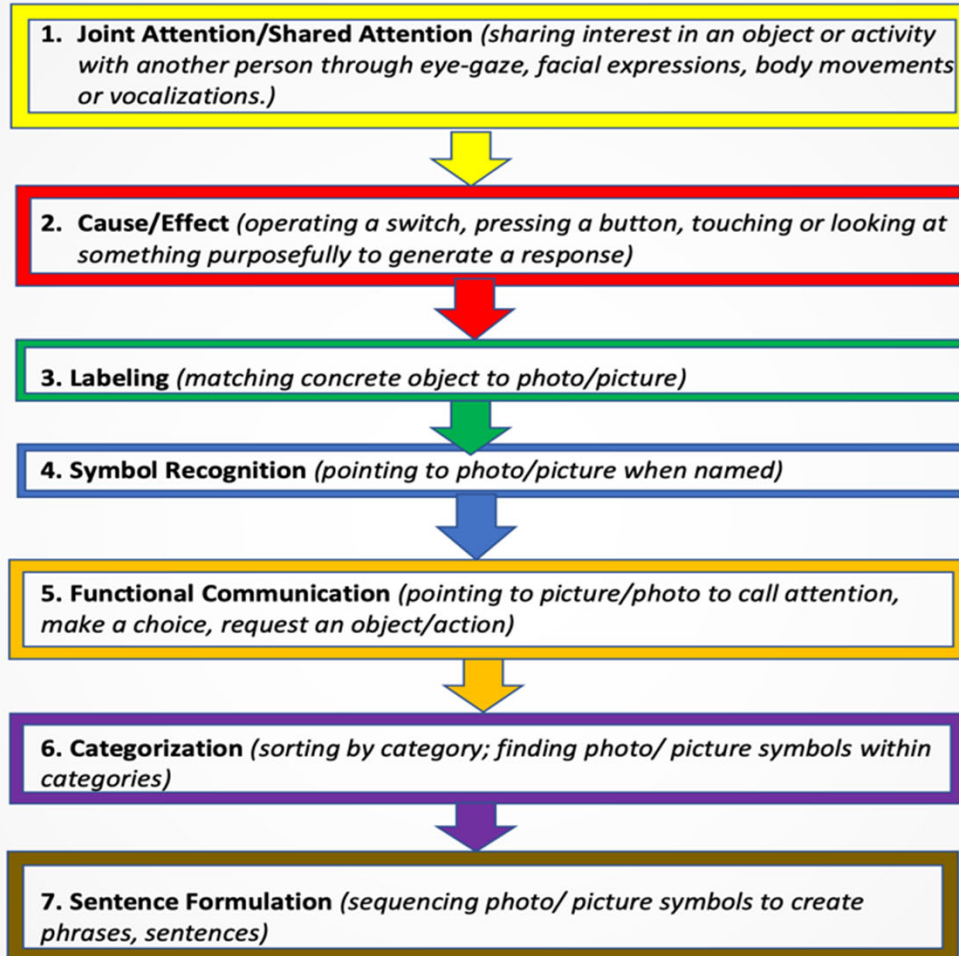
Advanced Concepts and
Communication

Functional Learning

Written Language

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AAC Skill Sets



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Skills Matrix for Students with Complex Communication Needs

Gives an overall profile of the student

Describes relative strengths and weaknesses

Defines barriers to learning and accessing the curriculum

Helps determine instructional levels

Assists the IEP team in developing realistic goals and objectives

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Skills Analysis Matrix for Students with Complex Communication and Learning Needs

Prepared for: Student

	AAC/AT	Receptive Language	Expressive Language	Social Communication	Independence/Academics
Skill Areas	Signs & Gestures Symbols(objects, photos, pictures) Voice-output device (VOD) Speech-Generating Device (SGD) Visual Schedules & Supports	Language Processing - Following verbal directions - Answering questions Language Reasoning - Problem Solving - Inferential Thinking - Abstract Thinking Receptive Vocabulary Language Literacy	Articulation Semantics Syntax & Morphology Verbal Formulation Expressive Vocabulary Language Literacy	Turn-taking Eye Contact Joint Attention Cooperative Play Reciprocity Discourse Social Reasoning Conflict Resolution Knowledge of Social Norms	Self-Help Skills Attending Transitioning Motor Self-Advocacy Executive Functioning Learning
Personal Strengths					
Challenges					
Observations / Comments					

(Developed by Betsy Caporale, M.S., CCC-SLP)

Skills Analysis Matrix for Students with Complex Communication and Learning Needs

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	AAC/AT	Receptive Language	Expressive Language	Social Communication	Independence/Academics
Skill Areas	- Signs & Gestures - Symbols(objects, photos, pictures) - Voice-output device (VOD) - Speech-Generating Device (SGD) - Visual Schedules & Supports	- Language Processing - Following verbal directions - Answering questions - Language Reasoning - Problem Solving - Inferential Thinking - Abstract Thinking - Receptive Vocabulary - Language Literacy	- Articulation/Phonology - Semantics - Syntax & Morphology - Verbal Formulation - Expressive Vocabulary - Language Literacy	- Turn-taking - Eye Contact - Joint Attention - Cooperative Play - Reciprocity - Discourse - Social Reasoning - Conflict Resolution - Knowledge of Social Norms	- Self-Help Skills - Attending - Transitioning - Motor - Self-Advocacy - Executive Functioning - Learning
Personal Strengths	✓ Uses gestures, pointing, pictures to augment verbal speech ✓ Navigates dynamic SGD to create simple messages	✓ Follows familiar routines and 2- step directions within structured settings ✓ Recognizes many common words by sight	✓ Verbal language skills have significantly improved over the past year ✓ Reads some simple sentences	✓ Well- behaved ✓ Sweet disposition ✓ Turn-taking ✓ Joint Attention ✓ Enjoys company of peers	✓ Self-help skills ✓ Has many interests ✓ Enjoys iPad/ learning activities ✓ Academics skills (matching, visual association, counting, basic addition, sight word recognition/ emerging reader, letter/number formation)
Challenges		✓ Answering "wh" questions ✓ Understanding lengthy, complex utterances	✓ Expressive vocabulary ✓ Verbal formulation ✓ Semantics ✓ Syntax and Morphology ✓ Articulation/Phonology	✓ Reciprocity ✓ Discourse	✓ Focus and attention for non-preferred tasks ✓ Following multi-step instructions ✓ Relies on adult support to complete many academic tasks
Observations / Comments	✓ Not a functional verbal communicator across settings ✓ Successfully uses visuals to aid in transitions	✓ Benefits from visual prompts/cues combined with verbal speech when given instructions		✓ Poor speech intelligibility and expressive language deficits interferes with ability to interact with peers	✓ Navigates iPad/computer educational apps independently ✓ Enjoys computer learning activities and engages in them for up to 20 minutes

Developed by Betsy Caporale, M.S., CCC-SLP, Augmentative Communication Solutions



The SETT Framework

A structure for guiding the AAC assessment and implementation to support teams in decision-making and feature matching.

Student

- Abilities, needs, and current communication and skills

Environments

- Where learning and communication happens, classroom, home, community

Tasks

- What tasks will the student participate in while in the learning environment

Tools

- Strategies, supports, and systems to assist in participating in the learning environment selected only after S, E, and T are understood

The Communication Matrix

A research-based, criterion-referenced assessment tool designed to support people with significant communication challenges.

Built on Decades of Research

- Developed and refined over 30 years across thousands of learners

Spans Pre-Symbolic Through Symbolic Communication

- Captures early behavioral communication as well as symbolic language

Not based on a Hierarchy of skills

- Profiles a student's current communication : meaning this is what the student is doing.

Maps Reasons for Communicating

- Refusal, obtaining, social interaction, commenting/asking questions, across all levels

What the Communication Matrix Measures

Three factors combine to build a full picture of how and why a student communicates.

7 Levels

- How the student communicates from pre-intentional behavior through symbolic language

1. Pre-Intentional
2. Intentional
3. Unconventional
4. Conventional
5. Concrete Symbols
6. Abstract symbols
7. Language

4 Reasons

- Why the student communicates
- Refuse · Obtain · Social · Information

9 Behavior Categories

- What the student physically does to send the message: gestures, vocalizations, symbols, speech, and more

Together: A Profile

- 24 specific reasons (e.g., “Requests more of an action”) map across Level × Reason
- The result is a visual profile showing exactly where a student communicates reliably and where the next teaching target is
- A student's level can (and often does) differ by reason e.g., higher for Obtain than for Social

Implementation

Skill Sets

- Consider *student's stage of learning and communication* when selecting learning activities

Motivation

- Provide *motivating, meaningful* learning activities

Engagement

- Engage student in learning activities at his/her *instructional level*

Expectations

- Have *realistic* expectations

Behavior

- Remember that *behavior is communication!*

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Teaming for Success

- Collaborate in the assessment process
- Develop Implementation Plan
- Implement AAC tools and strategies using Implementation Plan
- Adapt or modify learning activities to meet the unique needs of the student.
- Collect data, providing a dynamic, ongoing assessment embedded in daily routine.
- Develop academic goals embedding the use of AAC tools and strategies
- Provide staff trainings in their area of expertise

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AAC/AT IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

ACTIVITY	AAC/AT	LOCATION	FACILITATOR	WHEN

(V- vocalizations, SG-signs/gestures, VS- visual supports/schedules, SW-switch, CB-communication book or board, VOD-voice output device, SGD-iPad with visual scenes, COM-computer or tablet)

Developed by Betsy Caporale, M.S., CCC-SLP



AAC/AT IMPLEMENTATION PLAN, SAMPLE

ACTIVITY	AAC/AT	LOCATION	FACILITATOR As Needed	WHEN
Arrival/ Departure	VS – check schedule PCB	Bus/Classroom	Staff, peers	8:15/2:15
Free Time	VS PCB VG	Classroom	Staff, Peers	8:15-8:45
Group Learning Activities	VS- visual supports VG SGD (topic boards)	Classroom	Staff, Peers	8:45-9:15
Snack/Lunch Recess	VS VG PCB	Cafeteria/ Playground	Staff, Peers	9:20-9:45 11:15-12:00
Circle	VS, PCB, SGD, VG	Classroom	Staff, Peers	9:45-10:15
Art/Science	VS VG SGD (topic boards)	Classroom	Staff, Peers	10:15-11:00
Independent Learning Time	VS (task schedule) CB (adapted learning software)	Classroom	Staff	12:00-12:30
Speech	VS, PCB, SGD, VG	Classroom Or Speech Room	Staff, Peers	12:00-12:30 M/W
ELA	VS, CB (adapted literacy software)	Classroom	Staff	12:30-1:15
DEAR Departure	VS, CB	Classroom	Staff	1:15-2:00 2:00-2:15

(VS- visual supports/schedules, PCB- personal communication book, CB-ChromeBook
VG-verbal/gestures, SGD-speech generating device)

Developed by Betsy Caporale, M.S., CCC-SLP
www.aacimplementations.com

The Parent & Family Perspectives



“Parents see communication we may never see in a 30-minute session.”

Bringing Family Input Into Assessment, Planning and Implementation

- Ask what communication looks like at home, not just at school
- Include family-reported vocabulary, routines, and preferences
- Treat parent observations as valuable information

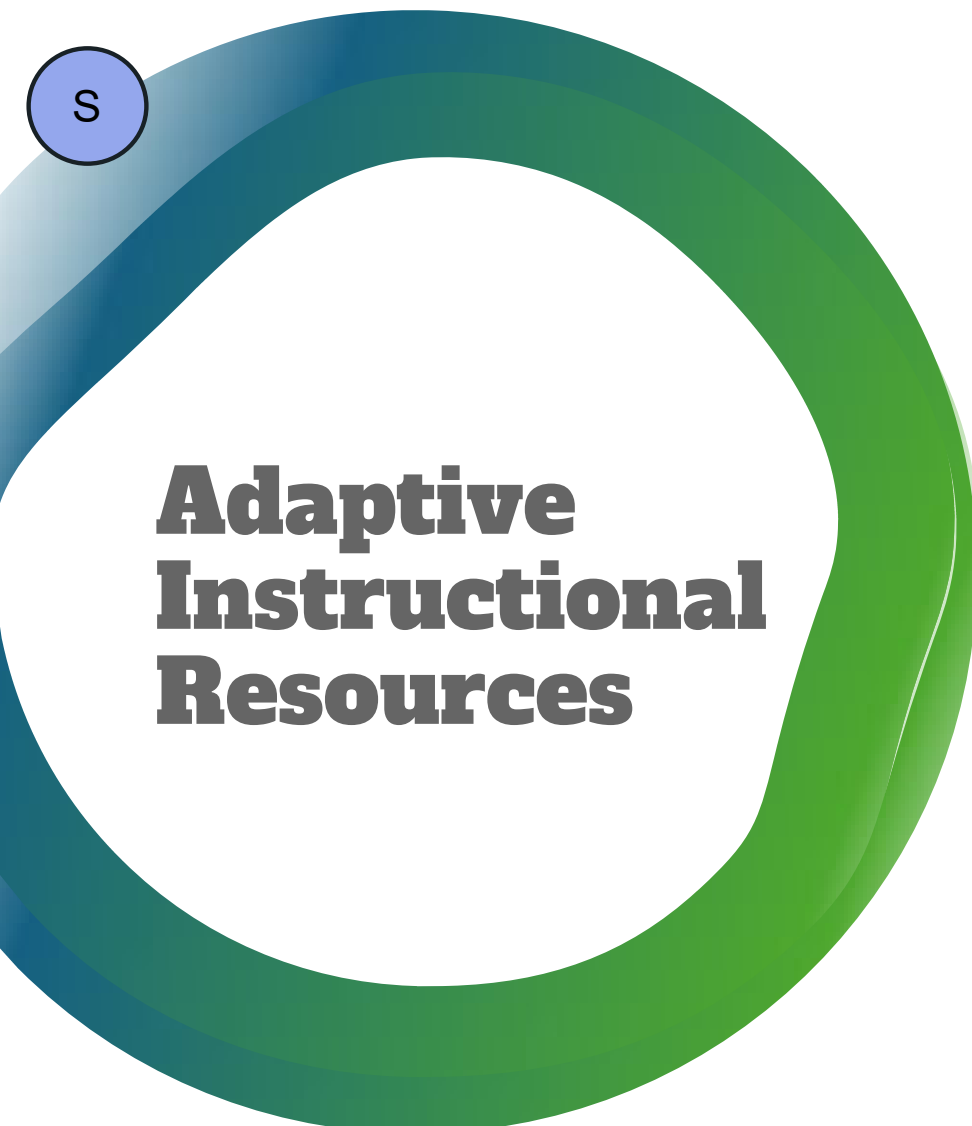
Selecting Appropriate Software/Apps

ADAPTIVE

- Can be modified to meet the unique needs of a specific student
- Materials are personalized based on student skills, interests and special needs (i.e., motor, visual, auditory, cognitive)
- Allow students to access the curriculum in an alternative manner

REMEDIAL

- Designed to “catch students up” to expected competency levels
- Not specifically designed for students with unique or complex needs
- Typically utilize a traditional instructional approach



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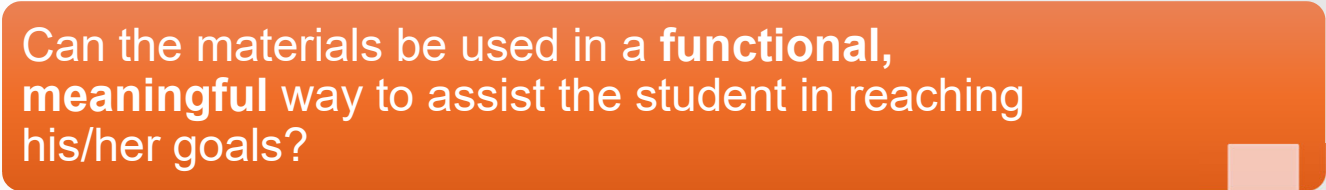
Adaptive Instructional Resources

- [Read It Once Again](#)
- [HelpKidzLearn Games and Activities](#)
- [Unique Learning System](#)
- [Clicker Software](#)
- [Readtopia/Reatopia go](#)
- [ALL Curriculum](#)
- [UFLI](#)

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When choosing instructional tools and materials for students with complex learning needs, consider:

Can the materials be used in a **functional, meaningful** way to assist the student in reaching his/her goals?



Do the tools and materials **increase independence**?



Is the student **given choices** regarding tools, materials and learning activities?

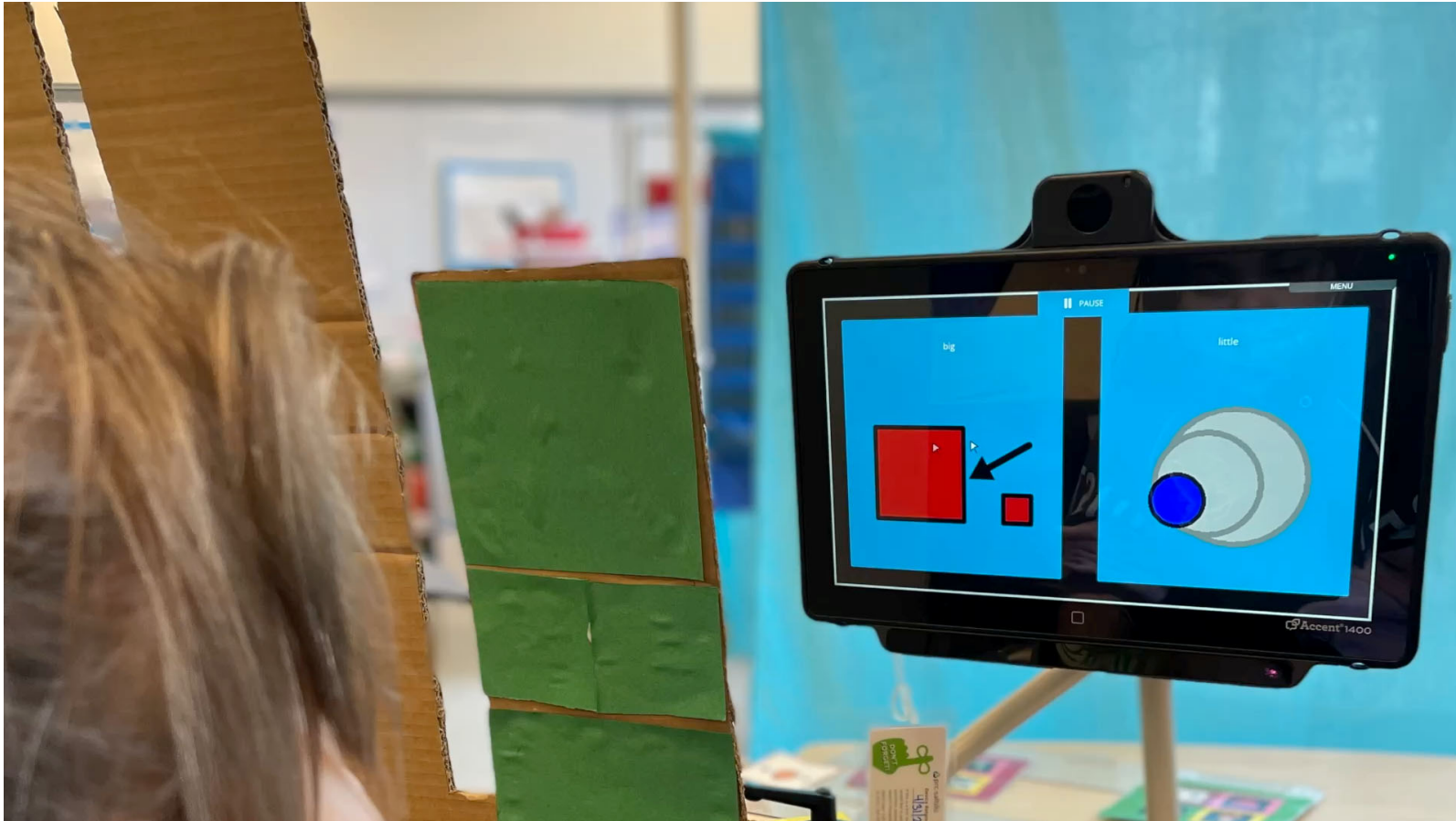


Weaving Literacy, Math & Language into Implementation of AAC

- 1 What print and symbols does the student already encounter daily?
- 2 How does the student respond to books, environmental print, and shared reading?
- 3 What vocabulary and language structures are embedded in classroom routines?
- 4 How can literacy exposure be built into every activity, not added afterward?

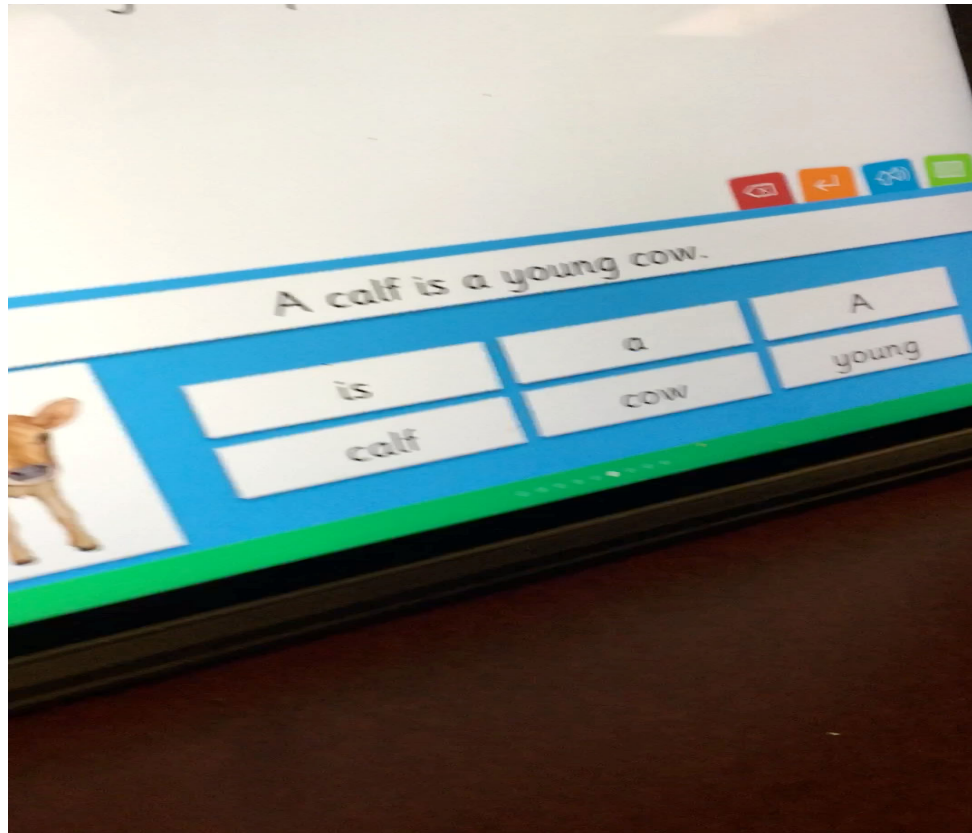
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Early Concepts Teaching and Assessing High Tech Eye Gaze



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Enhancing literacy and language skills with Clicker



ALL MEANS ALL.

Breathing is the only prerequisite that is relevant to communication.

Breathing equals life, and life equals communication. It is that simple."

~P. Mirenda

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Key Considerations

There is no “once size fits all” curriculum for students with complex communication and learning needs.

Students with CCN need their own unique materials, tools and strategies drawing from a variety of sources.

Collaboration among support providers within the classroom and fellow special education teachers within the district is crucial!

The collaborative, consultative model for serving this population is considered *BEST PRACTICE*! It's important that parents and administrators understand and support this.

Final Thoughts

- Communication is the foundation for all learning.
- Independence is key to learning, growth and development.



QUESTIONS

References

Creator: Dr. Joy Smiley Zabala, Ed.D. — originally developed in 1990 while she was an educational specialist with Region IV Education Service Center (Houston, TX); later affiliated with CAST.

Key references:

Donaldson, A. L., Corbin, E., Zisk, A., & Eddy, B. (2022). Promotion of communication access, choice, and agency for autistic students. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, 54(1), 140–155. https://doi.org/10.1044/2022_LSHSS-22-00031

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Key references:

Rowland, C. (1990). *Communication in the classroom for children with dual sensory impairments: Studies of teacher and child behavior*. (unpublished doctoral research forming the original longitudinal basis for the Matrix)

Rowland, C., & Fried-Oken, M. (2010). Communication Matrix: A clinical and research assessment tool targeting children with severe communication disorders. *Journal of Pediatric Rehabilitation Medicine*, 3(4), 319–329. <https://doi.org/10.3233/PRM-2010-0144>

Rowland, C. (2011). Using the Communication Matrix to assess expressive skills in early communicators. *Communication Disorders Quarterly*, 32(3), 190–201.

Rowland, C., & Schweigert, P. (1989). Tangible symbol systems: Symbolic communication for individuals with multisensory impairments. *Augmentative and Alternative Communication*, 5(4), 226–234.

Rowland, C. (2004). *Communication Matrix*. Oregon Health & Science University, Design to Learn Projects. <https://communicationmatrix.org>

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Resources

- All Curriculum
<https://www.mytobiidynavox.com/Store/ALL>
- Clicker – Crick Software
<https://us.cricksoft.com/>
- The Communication Matrix — Charity Rowland
<https://communicationmatrix.org/>
- HelpKidzLearn Games and Activities
<https://www.helpkidzlearn.com/>
- Language and Learning: A Framework for Inclusive Design (The Stages Framework)
<https://www.attainmentcompany.com/language-and-learning>
- Read It Once Again
<https://www.readitonceagain.com/>
- Readtopia/Reatopia
<https://myreadtopia.com/>
- The SETT Framework — Joy Zabala
<https://www.joyzabala.com/links-resources>
- UFLI
<https://ufl.edu/foundations/>
- Unique Learning System
<https://ufl.edu/foundations/>

Save the Date!

Wednesday, **October 7, 2006**

AAC Goal Writing and Documentation in the IEP

Presented by: Betsy Caporale and Sharon Redmon

(all USSAAC webinars are held from 7:00-8:00 p.m. Eastern except as noted)

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Message from Franklin Smith, ISAAC Executive Director

