

**April 27, 2022**  
**7:00 PM Eastern**

**Uncensored AAC:**  
**Exploring AAC Access to Profanity and Slang**

**Presenter: Hali Strickler, M.A., CCC-SLP**

**Facilitator: Amy Goldman, M.S., CCC-SLP**



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**by May 4, 2022**



# **Uncensored AAC: Exploring AAC Access to Profanity, Swearing, & Slang**

Hali Strickler, M.A., CCC-SLP  
TechOWL AAC Services Coordinator  
Institute on Disabilities at Temple University

# Speaker Disclosure

## Financial

- Hali Strickler is an employee of Temple University and receives a salary. She also receives compensation for private and contracted speech-language therapy services.

## Non-Financial

- Hali Strickler is a member of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) and a Special Interest Group 12 affiliate. She has no additional relevant non-financial relationships to disclose.

# Learning Objectives

1

Identify at least 2 examples of age-specific taboo words/concepts for different age groups

2

Discuss 3 uses of profanity in social communication

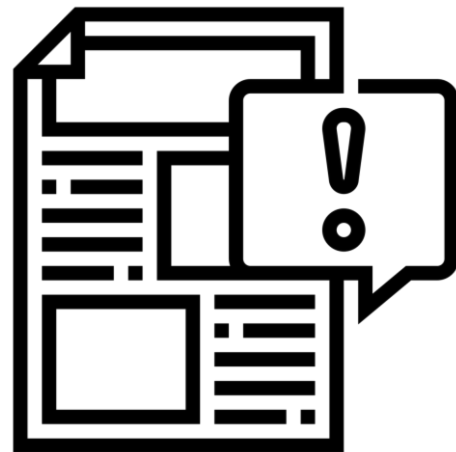
3

Compare at least 2 AAC devices/language systems and their access to related symbols for taboo words

# Content Warning

This presentation will discuss...

- Explicit language
- Sexual health terminology
- Abuse



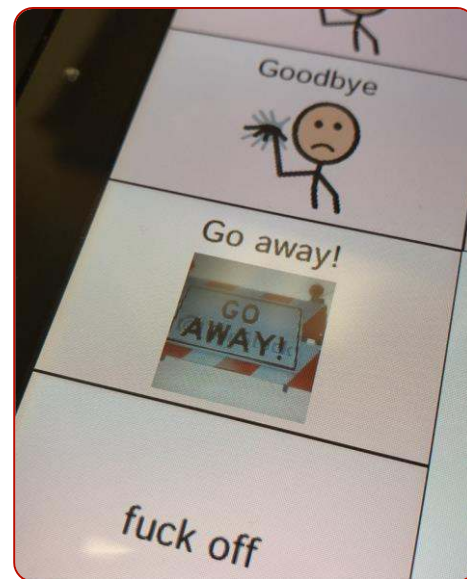
What's the "best" bad  
word you know?





# Why Talk About This?

- Communication is a human right
- Knowledge of & etiquette with taboo concepts/words is part of normal cognitive & sociocultural development (Jay, 2000; Jay & Jay, 2013)
- Contributes to communicative competence



# Defining Terms

- **Taboo:** a topic or concept a particular group of people considers “socially unacceptable”
- **Profanity:** language that is considered “taboo”
- **Swearing/Cursing:** using an offensive/“taboo” word; using a words that is considered profanity
- **Expletives:** an exclamation or interjection
  - May or may not be considered a swear/curse word
- **Slang:** “informal” language a particular group of people uses
  - May or may not be considered “taboo” or profanity

***Takeaway:*** *There are many definitions for these terms & many overlapping features.*

# Disclaimers...



Limited research available

- Most is based on Mainstream American English

Discrepancies in what is considered “taboo” or profanity exist

Taboo language/topics are a personal choice

- Not everyone will feel the same about certain concepts

Some words/topics are “taboo” but acceptable in certain contexts

- E.g., Talking about sexual anatomy or health with a doctor

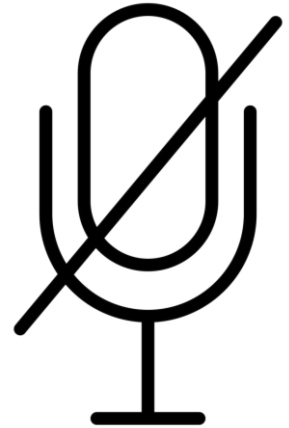
Certain words/topics are more offensive than others

Swear/curse words do not exist in all languages

- Some languages do not have “bad” words at all

# Profanity Regulation

- Profanity and other forms of taboo language have been historically regulated
- In the U.S., the FCC regulates “obscene, indecent and profane broadcasts”
  - Profane Content is defined as “grossly offensive” language that is considered a public nuisance
- Multiple Supreme Court cases have examined use of profane language
- Societal perspectives continue to shift on what is considered “profanity”



# What Makes a “Bad” Word?

- Societal/cultural norms
- Level of offensiveness/appropriateness
- Personal beliefs
- Age of the speaker/listener
- Words or phrases that refer to:
  - Irreverence to a religion’s doctrine
  - Sexual anatomy and acts
  - Bodily functions
  - People based on their identity and/or belonging to a group (racial, ethnic, sexual orientation, ability, etc.) in a derogatory manner



# Why Do We Use Profanity?

Express  
negative  
feelings

React to pain

Gain  
attention

Humor

Relate to  
peers/social  
reasons

Name calling  
& insulting

Emphasis

Casual  
conversation  
habits

Many more  
reasons...

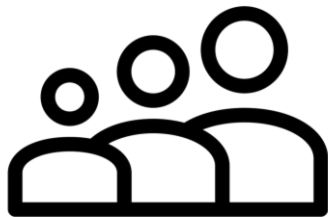
# Cursing is Common!

- 1% of speech consists of first-person plural pronouns (“we”, “us”, “our”)
- 0.5% of speech consists of swear words (Mehl & Pennebaker, 2003)
- Average speaker says 15,000-16,000 words per day
  - About 80-90 of these are taboo (Jay, 2009)



# How Do Children Learn “Bad” Words?

- Learning profanity/taboo language is a part of typical language development
- Children will learn “bad” words, taboo concepts, & swearing etiquette regardless of if they use this language
  - They may know a word is “bad” but might not understand the meaning or implications until they are older (Jay, 2009)





# Typical Development of Profanity

- Swearing starts around age 2
- Children starting school will have a working vocabulary of 30-40 “bad” words
  - Younger children are more likely to use mildly offensive words compared to older children/adults
- By ages 11-12, swearing is “adult-like”



# Top Taboo Words: Children

Age	1-2 Years	3-4 Years	7-8 Years	11-12 Years	All Children
<b>Top Taboo Words in Order of Frequency</b>	poop(y)	jerk	stupid	fuck	shit
	stupid	stupid	(oh my) god	shit	fuck
	butt	hate you	shit	damn	(oh my) god
	fuck	(oh my) god	suck(s)	(oh my) god	stupid
	shit	crap	bitch	stupid	damn
	(oh my) god	shut up	boob(s)(y)	fr(i)(ee)k(en)	jerk
	fart	damn	butt	hell	suck(s)
	bad	shit	shut up	asshole	crap
	bitch	hell	fuck	bitch	hell
	brat	poophead	hate you	suck(s)	bitch

# Top Taboo Words: Lifespan

Age	All Children	Adults
<b>Top Taboo Words in Order of Frequency</b>	shit	fuck
	fuck	shit
	(oh my) god	(oh my) god
	stupid	hell
	damn	(Jesus) (Christ)
	jerk	damn
	suck(s)	ass
	crap	suck(s)
	hell	goddamn
	bitch	bitch

# Concept Knowledge Development Relating to Sexual Health Topics

- Adult competencies and willingness to implement sexual health education varies (Cacciatore et al., 2020)
  - Children do not receive equal, age-appropriate information
  - Children with disabilities are especially at risk of receiving insufficient sexual education
- “Awareness of norms, taboos, and privacy is learned at an early age” (Cacciatore et al., 2020)

# Slang

- Specific to a group
  - Shared understanding of slang can include/exclude people from a particular group
- Reasons that slang is used:
  - Establish a level of informality/formality
  - Share information
  - Part of humor
- Many slang words/phrases come from speakers of non-mainstream American English and diverse communities



# Application to AAC



# Why is This Important for AAC?

- AAC users often have limited (or no) access to the words needed to talk about taboo topics
  - Many adults and teenagers do not have swear words, expletives, slang, etc.
  - Words related to sexual health and sexuality are not readily available
- Importance of understanding of profanity and sex related vocabulary
  - To identify and differentiate verbal abuse
  - Report abuse



# What the Research Says

People with physical/severe disabilities are 2-6 times more likely to experience abuse (Sobsey, 1994)

In a 2003 study of AAC users, 45% of 40 adult participants experienced crime or abuse (Bryen, Carey, & Frantz, 2003)

- 28% reported to police

73-88% of participants in the Speak Up Project reported "no means" for communication about healthy sexuality & related topics (Collier et al., 2006)



# Implications

- Access to extended vocabulary (including profanity and slang) can be a tool for self-expression and identity
- Taboo language is a part of language development → AAC users have the same right to these words/concepts as age-matched peers
  - Using these words or talking about these topics is an empowering, personal choice
  - Social benefits of using similar language to age-matched peers
- Increased ability to report abuse

# Current Barriers Reported/Observed

- Limitations in available systems
- Supports persons who program a device may censor the language available
  - Censoring may be due to:
    - Personal bias, prejudice
    - Misconceptions, not presuming competence or ability to learn
    - Replacing terms with more “appropriate” alternatives
    - Limited knowledge (e.g., parent not being aware of trending slang for teens)
    - Not updating vocabulary access throughout the lifespan (unintentional/intentional)
- Limitations in current AAC teaching strategies for children, emergent communicators, etc.



# Perspectives of Teenage AAC Users

Interviews with AAC Users ages 10-19 (Wickenden, 2011)

- When asked about slang → “THAT’S WHAT TEENAGERS USE AND I AM ONE.”
- Participants acknowledged concerns with “limited control of their own vocabulary”
  - Needed parents, therapists, or teachers to add new words or phrases to their systems
- Reported that their AAC use had limitations
  - Influence of adults on what they could say
  - Adults filtering/censoring their language impacted their autonomy and teenage identity

# Words Considered Most Important for an Adolescent AAC User (Dowling & Smith, 2009)

**fuck**

**piss  
off**

**feck**

**leave me  
alone**

**shut  
up**

**stop**

**curse  
words**

**ha  
ha**

“Age, disability, and the discomfort of others are not reasons to deny someone the vocabulary they desperately need.”

– Donnie T.C. Denome



# Supporting Access to Extended Vocabulary

- Provide access to vocabulary used by the person's age group
  - "Potty Talk" is engaging, motivating, and frequent in young children's speech
  - Teenagers and adults have a right to access swear/curse words
- Proper names of body parts is important across the lifespan
  - Medical, hygiene, self-care needs
  - Reporting abuse
- Terminology for gender identity, sexual orientation, healthy relationships, etc.

# Wrong Word, Wrong Time

- Sometimes we accidentally (or on purpose) curse
- Learning about taboos and swearing etiquette is a skill
- “How do I respond when someone tells me off using their device?”



# Availability & Access





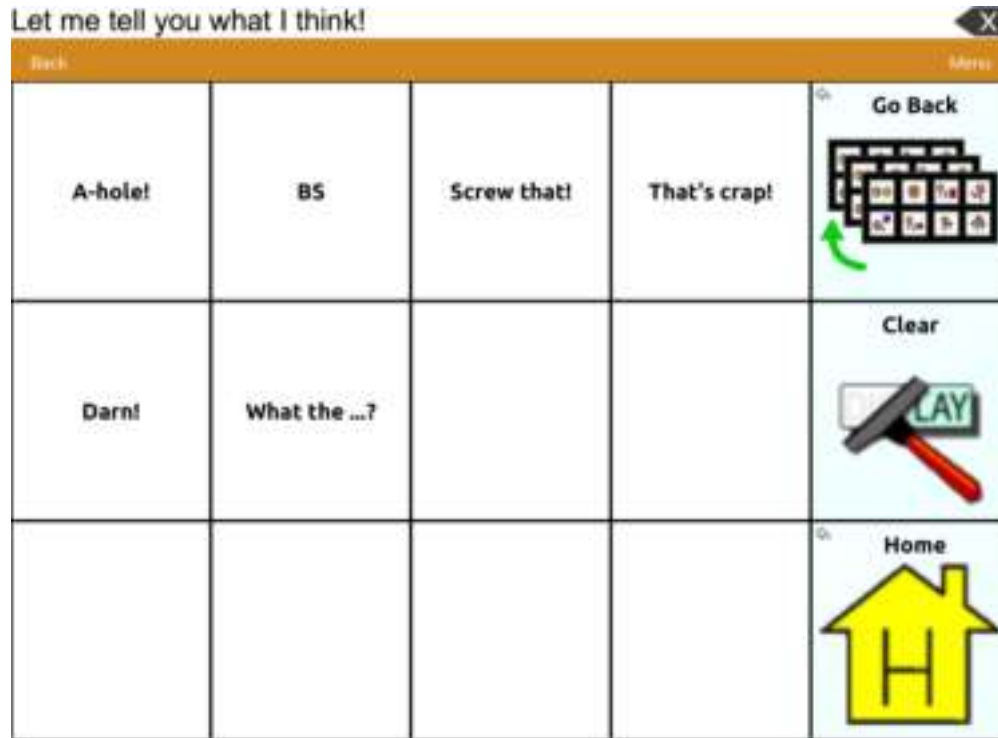
# Upcoming: Content Warning

The next few slides will contain...

- Explicit language
- Symbols (line drawings) of reproductive/sexual anatomy



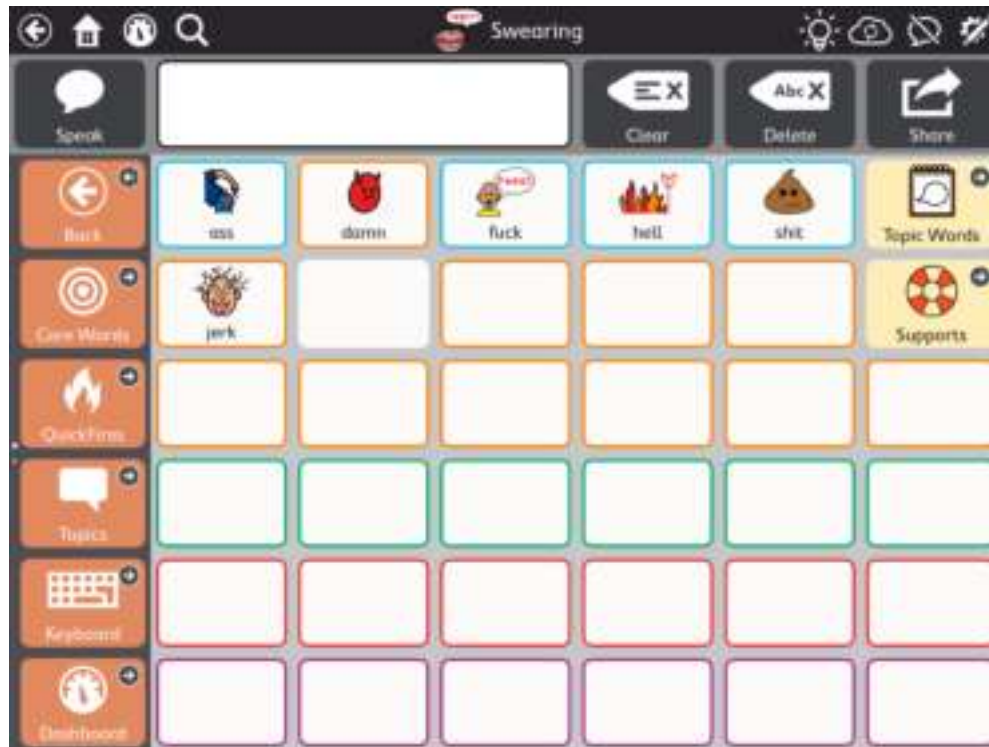
# TouchChat: MultiChat 15-Adult SS



# TD Snap



# TD Snap (with edits)



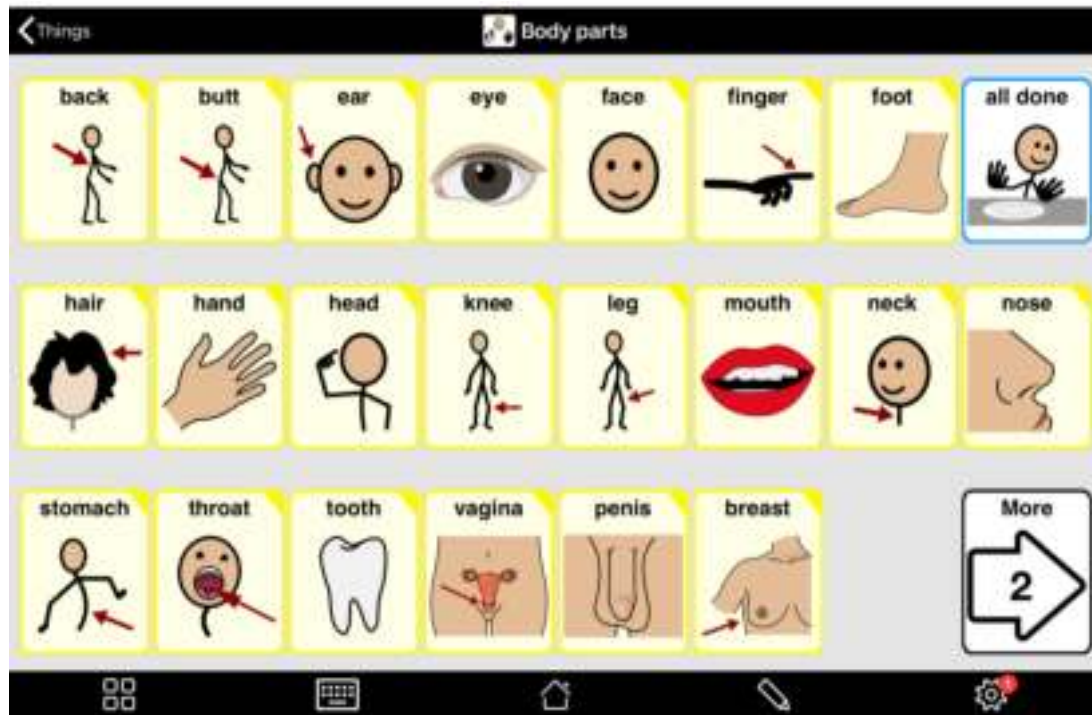
# Proloquo2Go



## Explicit symbols are available in Proloquo2Go 7.7

- Includes symbols for genitalia, sexuality, & intimacy
- AssistiveWare Support Article: <https://www.assistiveware.com/support/proloquo2go/organize/buttons/add-an-explicit-symbol-to-a-button>
- Article by Donnie TC Denome: <https://www.assistiveware.com/blog/sexuality-symbols-in-proloquo2go-7-7>

# Proloquo2Go (with edits)

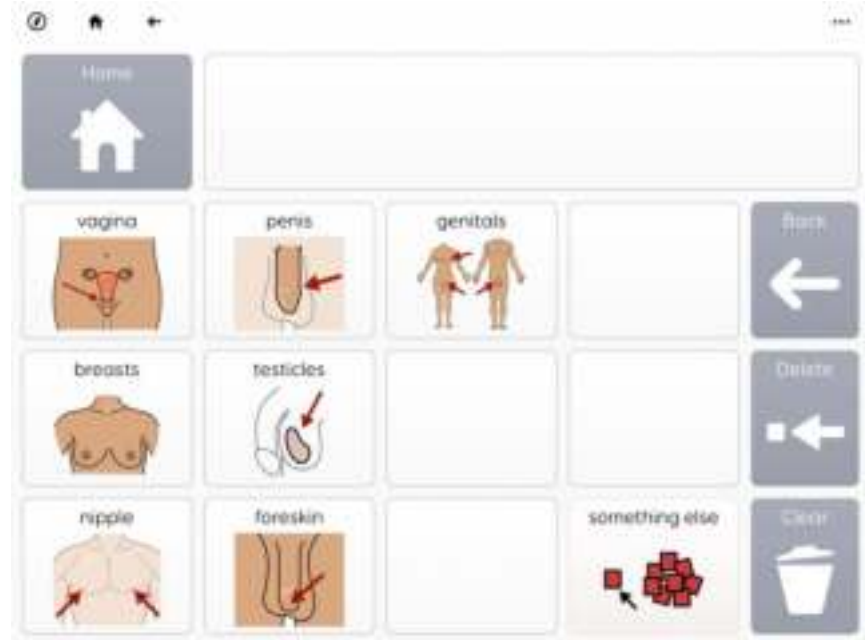




# Grid for iPad: Voco Chat Swearing

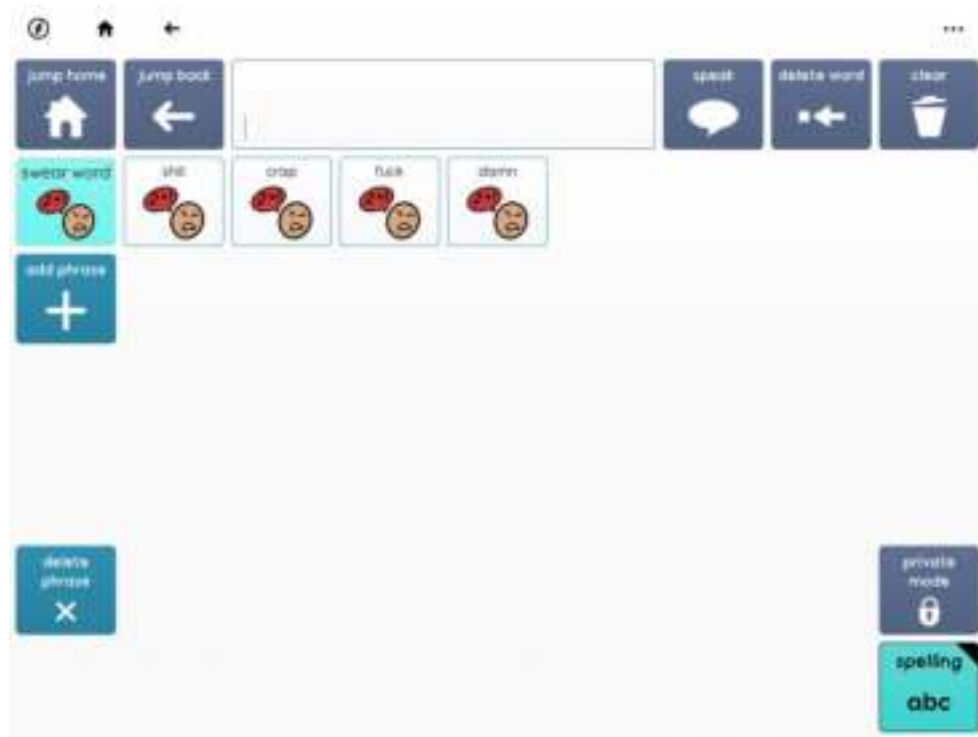


# Grid for iPad: Voco Chat Body Parts





# Grid for iPad: Super Core 50 Swearing



# Grid for iPad: Super Core 50 Body Parts



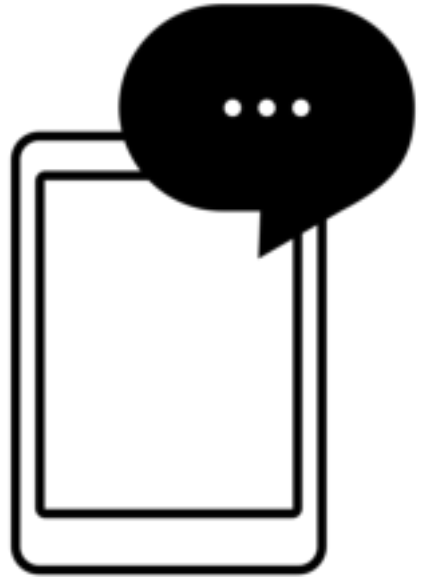
# Considerations & Thoughts

- Many apps do not have taboo vocabulary easily accessible
  - Some additional editing/programming is needed to provide access to these words
- Apps that do not have words for sexual health preprogrammed sometimes have symbols available within the system
  - Users will need to search the symbol library to access these if they are available
- Robust vocabulary for sexuality and related topics is becoming readily available/preprogrammed
  - Changes are coming...



# What Can You Do Now?

- Self-Advocates
  - Speak up about the importance of vocabulary access
  - Identify words, topics, and concepts that are important to you
    - Create a "Profanity", "Slang", "Sexuality", etc. pages on your device
    - Make sure you have vocabulary to report abuse



# What Can You Do Now? (continued)

- Family Members, Support Persons
  - When supporting children and teens, consider the vocabulary age-matched peers are using
  - Help program vocabulary that the AAC user wants if they need assistance
    - No judgement (especially for adults!)
    - Do not remove words that you “don’t like”
  - Advocate for the person you support and educate others
  - Support the person in swearing etiquette, self-advocacy, etc.



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**Thank you  
for  
attending!**

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