WORKING WITH AAC USERS

A guide on working with people who use Alternative and Augmentative Communication as their main communication aid.

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This is a guide on working with people who use Alternative and Augmentative Communication as their primary communication aid. They are often called AAC users or communication aid users. When working with someone who uses a communication aid, this could seem overwhelming and daunting at times if you don't feel like you understand how to communicate with and include them, but it doesn't need to be. Depending on what you are doing, there are many different approaches that you can use while still involving AAC users in the conversation or group. Hopefully, this guide will make it easier for you.

Remember - AAC users' access needs can be quite complex and varied, so always ask them what they are. Don't assume that this guide will tell you everything!

ABOUT DAVE

"I am a performance poet, writer, director, producer, and music artist. I consider myself an activist in the promotion of inclusive theatre practices. I promote self-expression and creativity in everyone, and by working inclusively, I aim to show that the arts belong to us all. I strive to raise expectations of the capabilities of disabled people and those marginalised by society.

I celebrate a culture of inclusion within my work and believe that through the arts, everyone can have a voice to recount their stories and experiences in this world. I hope others see me as a role model whose positive actions and character help create a more inclusive culture in the future. I have performed on stage and directed and performed in theatre and cinema. I teach about ableism and using drama methods with disabled groups and AAC users. As an AAC user, I run two businesses and my care package. Most AAC users run a care team and have some paid or unpaid occupations, so don't expect them always to be quick at replying to messages!

COMMUNICATION AIDS

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AAC users will use what is called "communication aids". These enable communication with others and fall into two categories - high-tech and low-tech communication aids.

High-tech communication aids

A high-tech communication aid is a piece of electronic technology that someone uses to talk, like a tablet or a laptop, a device that needs charging. Many different access methods for high-tech communication aid users in controlling these devices, including touchscreen, eye gaze, scanning, and other assistive technologies.

Controlling high-tech communication aids

High-tech communication aids can be controlled in many ways or a combination of these. Some are controlled with a standard or adapted keyboard and/or mouse or touchscreen. However, there are lots of other different access methods, including eye gaze (where a camera tracks where someone is looking on a screen and moves the mouse there), scanning (where the screen skips across selectable items and is started or stopped in the correct places by the communication aid user), and other cameras, mice, and buttons that the user can use. It may seem incredible that technology is helping us, but it's actually just a different way to move a mouse around the screen; it is not rocket science.

Low-tech communication aids

A low-tech communication aid is a sign, symbol, or gesture. People often use these to communicate messages quickly. This may be a gesture you recognise (e.g. a nod), or may be specific to an individual. People will usually have a way of saying "yes" or "no" - some might nod, smile, use their thumb, wink, or have a symbol on their chair. If you're working with a communication aid user, they will be happy to share these with you.

It's important to know what low-tech communication aids people use. This may be in their *access rider*, but if they haven't told you, please ask.

ENGAGING COMMUNICATION AID USERS

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It is important to make sure communication aid users are involved in workshops and casual conversations. However, for many communication aid users it can take a long time to program and prepare to say something. There are things you can do to make participation easier for them:

- Give them questions and conversation in advance. If this can't be done don't put pressure on them to answer all the questions in a short period of time because they will need more time to respond

- Always come to the communication aid user last, especially if you're about to change the topic

- Learn their preferred "yes" and "no" so you can easily find out if they want to say something and need more time, or if they're ready to move on

Working remotely with communication aid users

A communication aid user may require two screens during a video call, one for talking and one for the video call. This can slow them down, mainly if they use eye gaze for access. This means that if they are looking at another screen (where the video call is taking place), they may be unable to write down their message.

Try and establish low-tech communication methods, if you can, to make it easier for them to answer "yes" or "no" questions or to communicate that they're preparing something to say - but it may be harder for these to come across online.

Don't be offended if you see a hand appear on the screen with a cup or a tissue or if the AAC user is communicating with someone outside the call; they're just making sure their needs are met, whether it's a refreshing drink or a technical problem being solved.

Emailing communication aid users

Most communication aid users can use email on their devices. However, be prepared that they might not have the time to send a long response. Depending on their communication aid and method, they may use different spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Don't assume that these are a reflection of their intelligence, and prioritise establishing communication that works.

A lot of AAC users have reading barriers so always give documents in an easy to read document format. Voice notes are also often easier to understand than long documents.
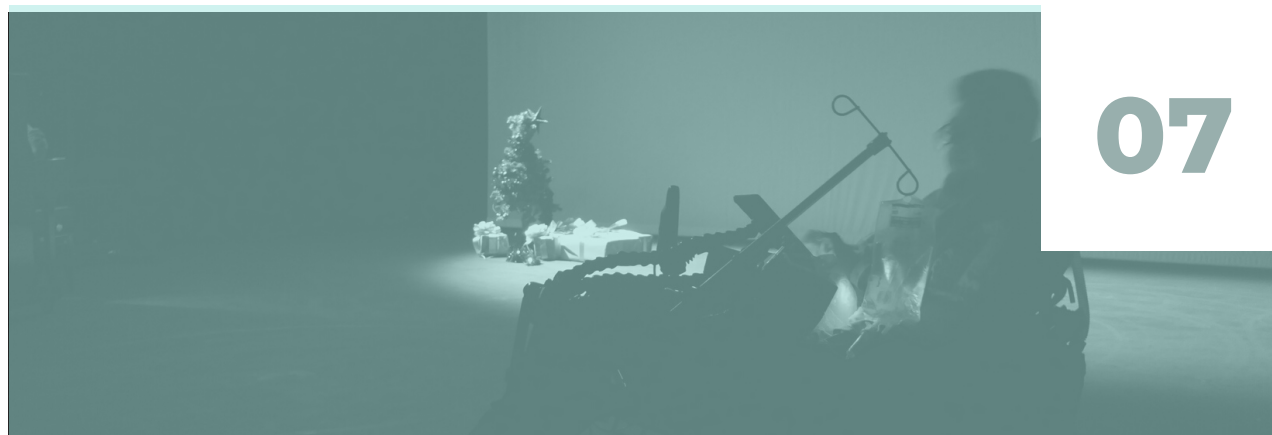
Other access needs

People who use AAC often have other access needs. They will usually be wheelchair users (or use other mobility aids), so step-free access is recommended. They may also need facilities like Changing Places toilets, so if you're booking a venue, please establish in advance what they need.

In the workshop space, there must be plenty of power sources to plug in electrical devices. An AAC user must have their computers, communication aids and power wheelchairs fully charged, especially if the day will be long (8 hours or more). A table in the room is also helpful for some communication devices.

AAC users often require full-time access support and have care workers highly trained to provide their support. A support worker is usually paid in the range of £13 to £16 depending upon experience, qualifications and knowledge of the person's access needs. If you are planning to work with an AAC user, please discuss this with them, as depending on the work or project, you may need to budget to cover some of the costs of this support.

If you are booking travel and/or accommodation, have a conversation with the communication aid user to ensure that the travel arrangements meet their needs, as they may need specific adaptions in order to travel or stay in a hotel.

UNIVERSAL ACCESSIBILITY

As with all inclusive work you should think about universal design. Universal design is a common tool used by architects, designers and cultural leaders to create buildings, services and products that are for as many people as possible whatever impairment they have. These principles can be applied to many forms of work, including designing accessible creative work.

Creative work and universal design

If you're doing creative work with an AAC user, there's a lot you can do to design these using universal design principles. As with any other group, focus on the overall outcomes and what you want to achieve within it. Everyone is different, and it's about exploring what's possible within the project's boundaries.

Warm-ups and body-work

- *Do you think as a facilitator how inclusive your style of workshop language is?*
- *Do you use body parts instead of specific stretches?*

If you say "can you focus on your arms, try to make your shoulders move, consider moving your right leg in a circle" then you can inspire the participants to think about their own physicality and encourage them to explore and get to know themselves and bring their body awareness to a high level. Make sure you're not asking people to do something that isn't physically possible for them, but encourage them to explore movement in the ways that work for them.

The aim of a warmup is to bring awareness of the body and the space we're in. Everybody has physical limits and we can use these to our advantage by getting them to know what those limits are and what everyone is capable of in terms of movement of their own bodies.

Warm-ups and voice

Most AAC users can use their physical voice to some degree. Whether it's just emotional sounds like a roar, moan, scream or a few words, some AAC users are able to speak a word or sentence (like "mum", "dad", "bro", or "sis"). How can you use that vocalisation in a voice warm-up for them? You could start by focusing on their breath and seeing how much control they have to make a sound. Once you have explored opportunities, you will find out what's possible creatively in the future.

Moving around the space

If the AAC user is in a powered wheelchair that they can control themselves, then you need to do very little except make sure that it is safe and everybody is aware of the wheelchair user. The powered wheelchair user should know how to move safely around everyone in the room and you should trust them (and anyone supporting them) to have that knowledge and skill. It's the same with a walking frame user or a self propelled wheelchair user. People using mobility aids aren't an inherent risk to health and safety, any more than anyone else moving in a space is.

But what if the wheelchair user doesn't have the ability to move by themselves and relies on someone else to push them in a manual wheelchair? What can you do so that they can have control of movement themselves? You can create a communication method between the wheelchair user and the person supporting them to make sure that the wheelchair user is in control of communicating where they are going in the space.

This could very easily be done using tools such as pointing and suggesting where to move and when not to move.

These techniques can be applied to a lot of movement exercises that ask people to follow, walk alongside, mimic, or lead each other, allowing access to function as a creative force.

Adapting games for people with a limited range of movement

First, ask yourself what the aim of the exercise or game is. Is the purpose group bonding or engagement? Are you trying to get people warmed up? Does the AAC user understand the game, and are they trying to participate in the environment? That's the most important thing for the facilitator.

As with all creativity, it's a process of exploration and discovery of what is possible, and this is no different working with AAC users. If you're not sure how to adapt a particular game, speak to the communication aid user in advance. If the group don't all know each other, foster a spirit of collaboration, engagement, and curiosity with the exercises, encouraging everyone to experiment with ways of making them work for one another.

Zip Zap Boing is a common game you can easily play with AAC users (see the following page for rules). Whether someone is able to verbally communicate "zip", "zap", and "boing" or able to point, what matters is that they're participating. Is the communication aid user engaged and active in the game? Are they aware of the Zip coming to them and attempting to pass it on to the next person? Do they respond when you add another rule like "Boing"? If they are looking at the person where the Zap came from, pointing at another person to pass it on, and participating in the calls and responses, they're fully involved in the game.

As the facilitator, you should only be concerned if they aren't participating and responding. Here, you can set expectations by looking, pointing at yourself when you get a zap, and pointing at the next person when you are passing it on.

Zip, sometimes known as "Zip Zap Boing" or "Zip Zap Zop",is a game often used as a theatre preparation exercise and sometimes as an elimination game.

The rules of this game have many variations. The most basic form of the game involves a circle of people sending a "clap" or "impulse" or "ball of energy" to each other in turn, saying the word "zip" each time. Other moves such as "zap" send the clap in different directions.

The game structure is folkloric and has differing rules and names in different places. When used as an elimination game, often the last three remaining are usually considered the winners of the game.

Although almost every practitioner of the game uses a different set of rules, for illustrative purposes, below are the set of rules used by the UK Scout Association:

- Players stand in a circle, roughly two metres apart.

- Play is passed from one player to another by use of the actions "zip", "zap", and "boing":

- Zip: A player clasps their hands with thumbs raised and index fingers pointing to an adjacent person in the circle and says "zip"; play passes to that person.

- Zap: A player clasps their hands as in Zip, but pointing to any non-adjacent person in the circle, and says "zap"; play passes to that person.

- Boing: A player performs a star jump and says "boing"; play passes back to the previous player

- Players who make a mistake are eliminated.

- The game ends when there are only two players left.

- Other rulesets may include actions like "Zoom", "Catch and Roll" and "Reflector".]

PERFORMANCE AND ACTORS WHO USE AAC

There are an increasing number of actors who use AAC, and can play parts - both parts written for AAC users and parts that don't specify communication methods, and would usually be played by a speaking person. Your approach will need to depend on the type of work you're doing. There are a number of different directions your work can take, but selecting which of these depends on the style of the play and what you're trying to achieve with your cast.

Why do you want to work with an AAC user? Is it because they are in your youth group and you think they are ready to step up to the next level of being semi professional and professional level? Is it because your play has an AAC user in it and you are showing their communication?

If you want the AAC user to speak on stage, there are several technical approaches you can use:

1. Recording their voice as a response

By downloading and installing the free programme *Audacity* onto a windows-based communication device, and setting Audacity to use the internal speakers as a microphone, you can record the AAC user's voice from the device, without recording background noise. This will let you record any lines you want in their own voice, and will produce good quality sound for the technician (there are guides on youtube if you get stuck).

The recordings can be exported and edited into the sound of the show. This means the AAC user can concentrate on their acting without worrying or being distracted by the communication aid, which can disrupt the flow of a play. This approach works best in traditional plays with an ensemble on stage.

It's important to note that while speech generating devices have limited options available, the accent, tone, and speed of speech are set by the AAC user, and represent the individual voice of the AAC user. Work with them to find the best ways for them to communicate - but also how they want to represent the voice of the character on stage.

2. Having the AAC user using their device live on stage

An AAC user can communicate live using various voices and sound effects. This can bring an element of surprise and comedy to the performance. If executed well, it can bring a lot of emotion into the performance instead of sounding like a monotone robotic voice that is continuous or constant.

Working with a music or sound designer and the AAC user's voice is an option, especially if you're doing a piece focusing on monologue or poetry. That way, the sound, speed, delivery, and tone of voice can be directed, just like with any other actor; an AAC user should have the choice of how to deliver their lines and the chance to experiment. This approach works best with monologues, open mike and poetry slams or comedy gigs and using loops and buttons to project sound and voice in a gig theatre / live musical poetry session.

3. Using another actor (disabled or non-disabled) to be the AAC user's voice in the play.

This can be playful and creative, but it needs to be set up very carefully and delicately so the non-disabled actor isn't taking over the AAC performer's role. The two performers need to be one with each other, to show that they are the same character throughout the performance so that the audience doesn't get confused. This can be very expensive as you are paying for two actors, but it's stunning when it works. This works well when you are doing a play for an audience of children and young people.
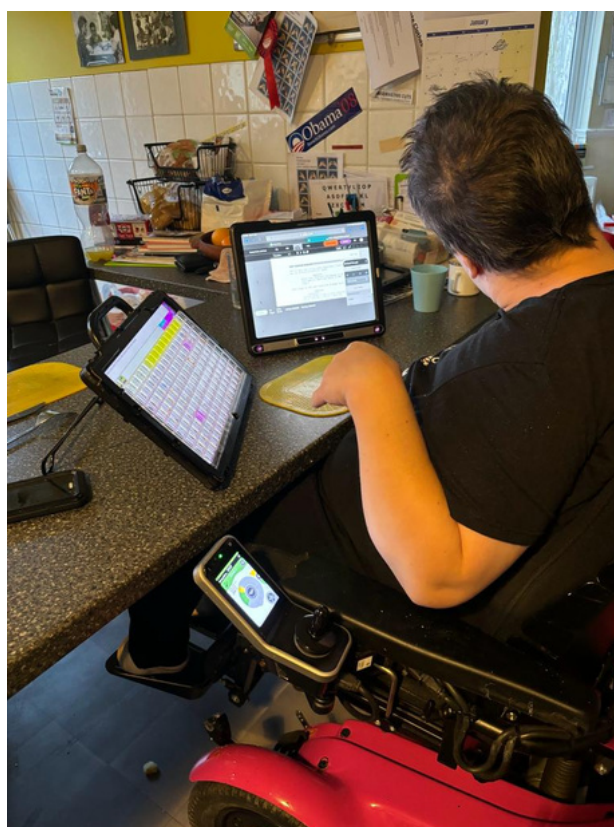
Music

Music is one of the most accessible art forms for AAC users. There are specialist apps for eye gaze devices such as "Clarion" or "Eyeharp". These enable eye gaze users to play musical instruments using their communication aids and are played by musicians at a very high level. The Clarion is designed by Open Up Music, who also have an orchestra, and by joining the orchestra you will get access to the Clarion. Eyeharp has a month's free trial.

Visual art

Communication aid users also use drawing programmes with their devices to create visual art. Remember that a communication device is actually just a way of moving a mouse around the screen, and communication aid users can use everything from Paint to Photoshop on their devices with a bit of practice.
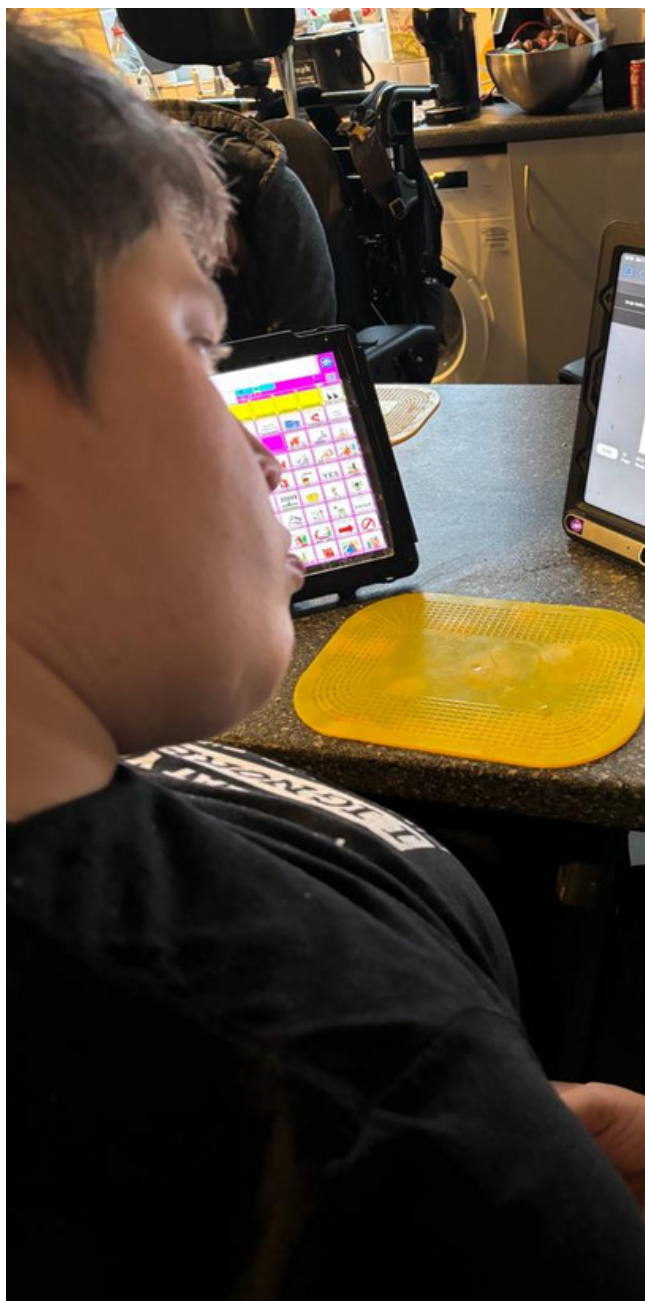
Creative writing

If an AAC user can speak through their device, there will usually be ways that they can use it to write as well. Most communication software has a way for the AAC user to save sentences on their device, including Smartbox Grid 3, Communicator 5, and TD Snap. Each of these programmes allows sentences to be put into some form of 'notebook' for the day, which can then be transferred to whatever software they want to save that text into. Some advanced AAC users use communication suites that have access to the whole Windows or iPad interface, with keyboards that let them type directly into programmes like Word or Google Docs instead of copying text into it. When starting to write creatively, it's important to do so in whatever way you're most comfortable writing, whether that's inside the communication aid software or outside it.

Just like any other writer would have many methods for writing down ideas - whether by hand in a notebook, in notes on their phone, or straight onto their computer, AAC users also have their preferred methods of writing. Personally I write my first notes of an idea using Grid (communication software) and then I copy it onto the writing software that is most appropriate for the piece that I am going to write it into. I use Google Docs if I am writing a poem or a story but I use 'Celtx' if I am writing a script for stage or screen. Every writer in the world will have a different process and apps that they prefer, and it's the same for communication aid users. Personally, I genuinely recommend Celtx for writing a script. It is so easy to write a neat and tidy script on the app or just online. You can choose what piece of the script you are writing and just go for it.

Performing on Camera and Film

A film set can be a busy and hectic environment with lots of expensive equipment and lights and stands and cables, so make sure that their risk assessment includes ensuring that it is safe for a wheelchair user to navigate, with ramps, cables taped down, and equipment positioned safely. If filming on location, ensure that there is an appropriate adapted or Changing Places toilet and that there is somewhere for the communication aid user to get changed if needed. Most film crews are well organised so ensuring this has been done is a shared responsibility between the AAC user and the producer or production coordinator.

If the AAC user is performing, like with theatre you have choices to make about how realistic you want your film to be in terms of how the AAC user is communicating. If they're a major part in the film, you have to consider the environments they're in, and how accessibility is shown in the shoot. When considering how they're communicating, you can also edit quickly and punchily to avoid delays in their lines, or have people understand their gestures in an almost psychic manner. The important part is that they are a part of the story, and that you're working with them on their performance, as with any other actor.

For amateur work, there are lots of useful tools like iMovie, but for work requiring a professional edit, if the AAC user is involved in this part of the process, it is often advisable to have a co-editor working with them during the cut - though this is typically industry standard. Make sure that if they're part of the editing team, you're communicating with them about ideas, from cut to colour-grading.

Even if they wouldn't otherwise be in the edit, to ensure that any communication aid use is shown in an authentic manner, it's important to have a communication aid user involved in the editing of the work.

CRIP TIC ARTS

Jamie Hale is the Creative Director of CRIPtic Arts, one of the most influential disabled-led organisations in the UK (Shaw Trust). They are also an award winning performer, director and poet

Jamie Hale

Dave is a performance poet and artist. They are an activist, promoting inclusive theatre practices. They promote self expression and creativity in everyone by working inclusively to show that the arts belong to us all.

Dave (The Shouting Mute)

www.cripticarts.org

@cripticarts

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