



AAC Explorers: Building Social Experiences for AAC Users

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Building Social Relationships

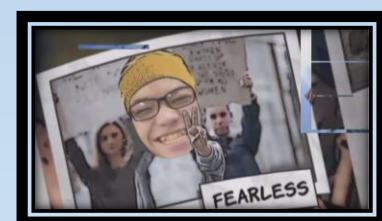
It is well known that communication is the key to a healthy relationship. It represents an essential skill worth learning that helps us do better in all of our relationships. Teens just want to have friends. Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) users just want to be teens. They all just want connections regardless of disabilities. What does "relationship" really mean? For AAC users, it means navigating social experiences on top of navigating the complexities of a communication system. Being part of an inclusive, collaborative community as an active and contributing member is a challenge many with complex communication needs can struggle to achieve. Feelings of isolation or which contribute to "physical and mental health issues" have been described by many AAC users including adult users (Cooper et. al. 2009; Hamm and Mirenda, 2006).



How can we support our AAC users. **How can we support building friendships and reduce isolation for complex communicators?**

According to ASHA it is "imperative that the goal of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) use, be the most effective interactive communication possible. Anything less represents a compromise of the individual's human potential" (ASHA, 2021).

Historically, there has been a lack of understanding of AAC by professionals (seeing AAC as a full, robust language) resulting from multiple changes in their languages, lack of communication partners and limiting connections with others. This in conjunction with the complexity of many of these students' significant health conditions which further limit their social environments, thus created the perfect storm for a lack of social interactions. Since the pandemic, some families have indicated that their student no longer had connection with the world outside their home while others have indicated that this world of isolation had already been their norm due to their students' individual health concerns. Simultaneously, lack of access to authentic reasons to communicate often result in caretakers or professionals changing or limiting vocabulary rather than expanding opportunity and increasing communication competencies (Light and McNaughton, 2014). These changes and limitations lead to inadvertently reducing access to language, lack of exposure to natural language opportunities, a reduction in available communication functions, a lack of joyful interactions outside of the family, lack of community identity, and a general lack of expectations. **How can students who do not attend school in person not only develop social connections, but maintain or increase their access to language?**



MA, WJ, LL, 2021

AAC Explorer Design

Adult volunteers from throughout Central California, i.e., Speech Language Pathology, Special Education Mild/Moderate/Severe Education or Assistive Technology Augmentative and Alternative Communication, utilized a language stimulation approach, engaging and interesting activities to promote AAC use and building of distance friendships. Every adult volunteer facilitator had a designated role for supporting the session. Roles included: graphic designer, host to control the breakout rooms, activity leader for each breakout room, assistant activity leader, photographer, whole group activity leader. AAC Explorer Design was inspired by AAC Academy (Austin, 2015, 2017) and Out and About, but with differences in delivery, group objectives and structure. Facilitators used adult guided, teen centered activities which allowed AAC Explorers to gather and connect with other teens who share a similar identity. Through social and creative (everyday teen) activities, different skills were enhanced:

- Opportunity to develop closer friends due to shared interests
- Build teamwork and problem-solving skills
- Develop emotional regulation that carries over to all aspects of daily living
- Expand their social circle, develop new skills, and become better problem solvers.

Having assigned facilitator roles also allowed the adults to focus on the guiding, supporting and fading of support (the dance) necessary in building independence and self-guidance.

Time	Roles	Responsibilities
10 min. for transition	Zoom break out room master and designer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open waiting room • Move groups to break out rooms and group closer/photographer • Close the rooms • Bring back for closing activities
25 min.	Opening group leader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create PowerPoint/Google Slides • Video related to theme • Check in... • Set-up shout outs • Rotate students for shout outs • Introduce break out theme groups
20 min. (1 hour)	3 Breakout room facilitators (past ideas-games, music, social, mad libs, would you rather, activity, poems, movies, video shorts, jokes, pajama party, science, virtual escape room, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create PowerPoint around the theme for interaction in breakout room • Focus on core words • Design and pace activity for student engagement • Focus on student-to-student interaction not student to adult interaction • Initiation not just responding • Key is language functions (not just requesting- commenting, questions, direct, question, describe, protest, etc.) • NOT YES/NO • Add wait time
25 min.	Closing Group leader/photographer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create closing group activity (template) • Add pictures from the breakout rooms • Summarize the sessions • End with social closing

Activities generated with communication Teen focus

Visual Design	Pragmatic Skill	Core Words	Examples of use	Activity	Partner Strategy	Communication Partners	Lang. Sample
Power point/ Google Slides- Escape Room	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conversational skills • Asking for, giving and responding to information • Turn taking • Introducing and maintaining topics • Contributing • Commenting • Asking questions • Avoiding repetition or irrelevant information • Asking for clarification • Using age-appropriate language • Humor • Gaining attention and interrupting • Asking for help or offering help • Problem-solving 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Go • Help • I like/don't like • Help (me) • Don't know • Where/what/how • That/here • Stop/don't • Maybe • Text • Pronouns+ • Prepositions+ • Adjectives+ • Away • Think 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who makes? • What do you think? • Where should we go? • What happens if we don't get there? • Now what? • Who did it? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All slides in Escape Room (designed by Facilitators) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wait time • Structured choices • Model • Comment • Guide/support communication breakdowns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitators • Co-Facilitators • Group 1 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data taken in activity

AAC Explorers Start Their Journey

- 12 AAC users: ages 13-20 from 8 districts throughout Central California
- Interests: Music, Jokes, Competitions, Literature (Harry Potter, Twilight), Sports, Makeup, Dance, Alexa, Nickelodeon, Movies, School Dances, Reading, Science
- Direct access included: touch and eye gaze
- Indirect access included: switch scanning
 - Single and dual switch auditory scanning
 - Placement of switches-foot, head, forearm and elbow
- Program and related services: Home Instruction, Moderate Severe Special Day Class, Orthopedically Impaired, Speech and Language Impaired, Visually Impaired, Orientation Mobility, Occupational Therapy, Physical Therapy, Adapted Physical Education, Assistive Technology and Nursing
- Communication: Non-verbal to Limited intelligibility <30%
- One time a month virtual social gathering for two hours
- Created teen peer connections moving beyond adult to teen relationships
- AAC Explorers provided a means of effective communication to individuals with complex communication needs. Analysis of an effectiveness survey, completed by the AAC Explorers indicated: AAC Explorers felt heard, were able to state their feelings and opinions, and were inspired and motivated to talk to other AAC Users
- Activities were meaningful, relevant, engaging and motivating. AAC Explorers had a high interest in Music, Jib Jab activities, Games, Poetry and Shout Outs



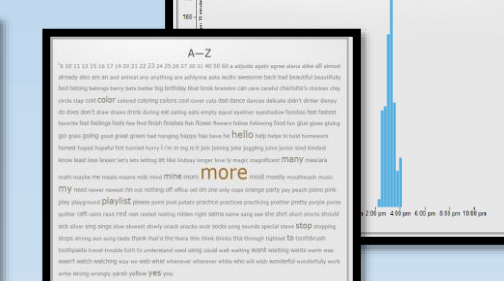
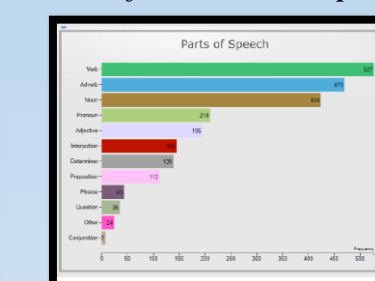
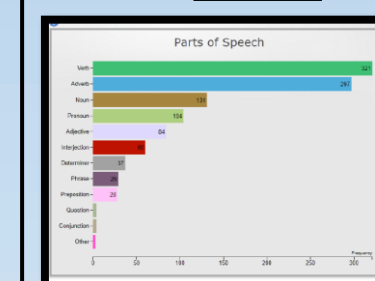
"laughing, music, shared joy, meaningful interaction"

"Great experience"



Specific Example of Student Data:

- Female, age 17
- Diagnosis-Bilateral, frontal Polymicrogyria, Agenesis of corpus callosum, Cortical Refractory epilepsy and Cerebral palsy, quadriplegic
- AAC Language- Prentke Romich-Core Scanner (Blast)
- Access- single switch auditory scanning- left foot
- Length of time using any AAC less than 2 years
- Social interaction- limited due to home hospital education placement
- Data analysis comparison (Source: Realize Language)
 - overall growth of 114% (parts of speech usage) with increases of: 64% verbs; 58% adverbs; 275% determiners; 286% phrases; 141% Interjections
 - New parts of speech/functions -questions, conjunctions, other



Conclusions

AAC Explorers formed in October of 2020 to build social experiences for AAC users and their communication partners with a focus on expanding their social networks (Blackstone, 2012) and to increase effectiveness of interactions. AAC Explorers created a safe environment to share communication. Students participated for two hours a month across eight months demonstrating an increase in communication skills: social language, initiation, interaction, repair strategies, range of partners and communication functions. Each AAC Explorers' social experience is different and dependent upon communication skills/partners and an overall belief system that builds on decision making skills. OUR AAC users expressed feelings of being alone and being ignored gradually, as the group design created a supportive and safe environment for personal reflection. Their development of self-determination and self-advocacy was evident when several Explorers stated, "Friendship is not being alone" and asserted that we need to "Listen." AAC Explorers supported building social experiences within an inclusive environment where AAC Language was a focus, allowing all forms of communication. Not all students have or will return to an in-person learning environment, but through the platform of AAC Explorers, they can access a teenage community regardless of their future educational situations. In the AAC Explorers social environment, families stepped back as their child's independence, social communication, and advocacy skills increased. One family summed it up best "it changed my daughter's life and gave her access to the world."

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Additional resources can be found using QR code

Speaker Disclosures

Financial: Michelle Austin and Laura Lavery are salaried fulltime Employees with the California Department of Education, Diagnostic Center Central California, Ca. State Dept. of Education Nonfinancial: None to report
Financial: Wylanta Jones is a salaried fulltime Employee with Atascadero Unified School District. Nonfinancial: None to report