Supporting Communication in Those With Limited Verbal Skills

We may talk about people with an Intellectual or Developmental Disability (IDD) who have limited verbal skills as being non-verbal. In fact, they may use gestures and vocalizations to communicate, have beginning expressive language skills, can speak about preferred topics, or answer questions in the context of a current situation but may not be able to tell us how they feel or what they need. When a person with an IDD has limited verbal skills, additional communication supports should be considered to help them express their wants and needs to others. These supports are called Augmentative and Alternative Communication or AAC.
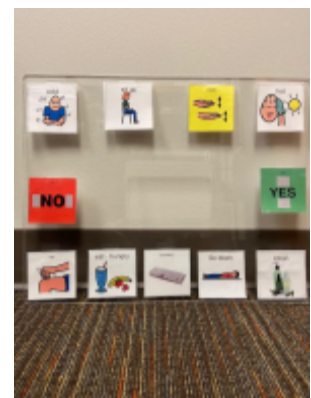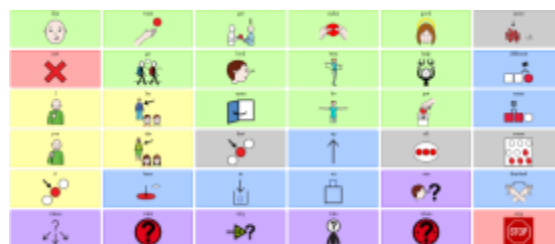

Sign Language

AAC can be unaided or aided. To use unaided AAC systems, you do not need anything but your own body. If an individual doesn't have verbal speech or signs, you may get a lot of good communication from them with a simple Yes and No. The individual could give a response using gestures, body language, facial expressions, and sign language, all examples of unaided AAC. Pointing is a great option for many individuals. If a person doesn't reliably point, maybe they can swipe at things instead. Or you may actually offer a choice of items and exchange it with the individual if they reach for it. If reaching or pointing isn't reliable, then eye gaze (or pointing with your eyes) to a desired object, word, or picture can work well.

An aided system uses some sort of tool or device. There are two aided systems – basic and high-tech. A pen and paper is a basic aided system. Pointing to letters, words, or pictures on a board is a basic aided system.

Eye Gaze Board with Pictures

Choice cards can be a low-tech-aided system to communicate preferences. The idea behind choice cards is to create lots of cards representing ideas either using pictures, symbols, or words and then have the individual prioritize them or sort them somehow. If you move the choices to a computer, it becomes a high-tech-aided system and may include speaking for you when touching letters or pictures on the computer screen.

High Tech Aided System on a Computer Screen

It can be daunting to make a decision about which system or device could be beneficial when you consider the many systems that can be used for AAC. Unaided systems just require training - for example, training the individual to use specific words, gestures, or signs, and/or training the receiver to understand what the facial expression, vocalization, or gesture means.

For aided AAC systems, there are two resources in Utah you can contact to support the decision-making process.

- Utah Assistive Technology Teams/UATT. The Central Office for the UATT is located in Salt Lake City and can be contacted to find the local team leaders in each area. These teams work in all the school districts, are available to students in the public education system from ages 3 – 22 years old, and can be a resource to the IEP/504 team members.

- Utah Center for Assistive Technology/UCAT. This office serves people with disabilities across Utah with any disability, any age, and with any need. They are also located in Salt Lake City, with Assistive Technology Specialists who are able to talk and meet with individuals about their needs.

Created with assistance from Robert Woodbury Assistive Technology Specialist Cache County School District

Resources:

- ASHA
  https://www.asha.org/public/speech/disorders/aac/
- UATT
  https://jobs.utah.gov/usor/vr/services/uatt.html
- UCAT
  https://jobs.utah.gov/usor/vr/services/ucat.html