



Practical Guides & Toolkits

Communication Aids & AAC Toolkit

Choosing, building, and modeling Augmentative and Alternative Communication —
from first symbols through natural, everyday use.



AAC Types · Skills Checklist · Core Vocabulary · Modeling Strategies · Goal Builder

How to Use This Toolkit

AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication) covers any tool or method – beyond speech alone – that helps someone express themselves: gestures, picture boards, apps, or dedicated speech-generating devices. This toolkit walks through the types of AAC, a skills checklist, a starter vocabulary bank, and the modeling strategies that make the biggest difference in whether an AAC system actually gets used.

Getting started

- AAC does not replace or delay speech – for most people, it supports and often accelerates spoken language development.
- Start wherever the person already communicates (gesture, vocalization, behavior) – AAC adds to this, it doesn't discard it.
- A system is only working if it's available everywhere, all day – not just during therapy or teaching time.
- Low-tech and high-tech aren't a ladder to climb – many people use several types together, permanently.
- This toolkit pairs with NeuroReHub's IEP Strategy Template (Section G) and Behavior Management Plans toolkit.

A note on approach

- Presume competence – understanding is almost always ahead of expressive output; talk to the person at an age-appropriate level, not below it.
- Every communication attempt is valid – a reach, a vocalization, a sign, and a device message are all “real” communication.
- Progress isn't always linear, and that's normal – building a reliable communication system takes sustained modeling over time, not a single training session.

A: Types of AAC – Quick Reference

Most people use more than one type together, and that's expected, not a sign something isn't working.

Type	Examples	Best For / Notes
Unaided (No Tools)	Natural gestures, facial expression, sign language / Makaton	Always available with no equipment; needs a communication partner who understands the system
No-Tech Aided	Real objects, photographs	Concrete and easy to grasp early on; vocabulary is limited to what's on hand
Low-Tech	Picture symbol books/boards, alphabet or letter boards	No batteries, portable, inexpensive; vocabulary limited to what's printed or built
Mid-Tech	Single- or multi-message voice-output buttons	A gentle first step into voice output; limited number of stored messages
High-Tech	Speech-generating devices (SGDs), AAC apps on tablets, eye-gaze systems	Largest, most flexible vocabulary that grows with the person; needs setup, training, and reliable power/access

B: Communication Skills Checklist

Rate where things stand today — I = Independent · V = Verbal/Visual Prompt · P = Physical Assist · N = Not Yet.

Communication Skill	I	V	P	N	Notes
Requests wants/needs (e.g. “more,” “help,” “stop,” specific items)					
Rejects or protests appropriately (e.g. “no,” “all done,” pushing away)					
Comments or shares something of interest					
Asks questions					
Answers questions					
Uses greetings & social routines (hello, goodbye, please, thank you)					
Expresses emotions or internal states					
Repairs a communication breakdown (tries again if not understood the first time)					

C: Choosing the Right AAC Approach

There's no single “right” system – the best AAC is the one the person will actually use, everywhere.

- Motor access – how the person points, reaches, or otherwise selects (direct touch, switch access, eye gaze)
- Vision and hearing needs
- Cognitive & language comprehension level
- Literacy skills – symbol-based vs. text-based systems
- Portability & the environments it will be used in (home, school, community)
- Funding, training, and ongoing support available

AAC Snapshot:

Current communication methods (gesture, vocalization, sign, device, etc.)

Motor / sensory considerations

Language & symbol/literacy level

Environments AAC will need to work in

AAC system(s) being trialed or currently in use

D: Core Vocabulary Starter Bank

Core words make up most of everyday talk – a small set reused constantly, across every topic and setting.

Category	Starter Words
Pronouns / People	I · you · we · it
Core Actions	go · stop · want · like · help · make · put · look · come · give
Descriptors	big · little · hot · cold · good · bad · more · all done
Social	hi · bye · please · thank you · yes · no · help
Question Words	what · where · who

This list is a starting point, not a fixed set – build outward from words the person is already motivated to use, and add fringe vocabulary (specific people, places, and interests) around this core.

Board Template – sketch a layout, then add words or symbols

E: Modeling & Implementation Strategies

The single biggest factor in whether AAC is adopted: how much it's modeled by communication partners.

- Model AAC use yourself, throughout the day — point to or press words as you speak them (aided language stimulation), without requiring the person to respond each time.
- Comment more than you question — narrate what's happening rather than testing (“I see a dog!” instead of “what's that?”).
- Follow the person's motivation and interest — model vocabulary tied to what they're already engaged with.
- Build in wait time — pause several seconds after modeling or asking, to give real time to process and respond.
- Expand on what they communicate — if they say/select one word, model it back plus one more (“go” → “go car”).
- Keep the system within reach at all times — a device left in a bag, or a board on a high shelf, can't be used.

F: Communication Partner Tips

How the people around an AAC user respond shapes how much they use it.

- Presume competence — talk to the person at an age-appropriate level; understanding usually runs ahead of expressive output.
- Give processing time before jumping in or answering for them.
- Don't finish sentences or speak for the person unless they've asked you to.
- Honor all communication attempts — gesture, vocalization, and behavior are communication too, not just device use.
- Respond to the message, not just whether it was “correct” — a near-miss selection is still a real communication attempt.
- Model more than you quiz — natural conversation builds skills faster than repeated “what's this?” testing.

G: AAC Goal & Plan Builder

Turn today's snapshot into a plan the whole team can model consistently.

Communication goal

Vocabulary focus this term

Who will model, and how often

How progress will be measured

Review date:

H Troubleshooting Common Challenges

Common sticking points, and what tends to help.

Challenge	Possible Reason	Try This
System is only used in therapy, not at home or school	Not modeled or available in other settings	Keep it within reach everywhere; ask every communication partner to model, not just the therapist
Only uses single words or symbols	May not have seen expanded models	Model 2-3 word combinations regularly, building on what they select
Prefers gesture over the AAC system	The system may be slower or harder to access in the moment	Reduce physical/menu barriers; make sure frequent words are quick to reach
Gives up or gets frustrated quickly	Vocabulary gap, or access is too slow	Pre-program frequently needed words; celebrate attempts, not just successful ones

Team Sign-Off

Name	Role	Signature	Date
	Parent / Guardian		
	Individual (if appropriate)		
	Speech-Language Therapist		
	Teacher / Support Staff		

Appendix A – AAC Glossary

A quick reference for meetings – plain-language, not clinical definitions.

AAC	Augmentative and Alternative Communication – any tool or method that supports or replaces spoken communication.
SGD	Speech-Generating Device – an electronic device that produces spoken output from selected words or symbols. <i>(available at the NeuroRehub shop)</i>
Core Vocabulary	A small set of high-frequency words reused constantly across topics and settings (e.g. go, want, more).
Fringe Vocabulary	Specific, less-frequent words tied to a person, place, or topic (e.g. names, favorite items).
Aided Language Stimulation	Modeling AAC use by pointing to or activating words on the system while speaking, without requiring a response.
PECS	Picture Exchange Communication System – a structured picture-based AAC approach.
Partner-Assisted Scanning	A communication partner presents options in sequence for the person to select from, often for those with limited motor access.
Eye-Gaze	An access method where a device tracks eye movement to select words or symbols.
Switch Access	Selecting items on a device or board using one or more physical switches, often paired with scanning.
Communication Board	A low-tech display of symbols or words used to communicate by pointing or eye gaze.
Multi-Modal Communication	Using more than one communication method together (e.g. gesture, device, and vocalization).

Appendix B – When to Bring in a Professional

- You're unsure which AAC type or system best fits the person's motor, sensory, and language profile.
- Progress has stalled despite consistent modeling over several weeks.
- The person needs a formal AAC assessment for funding, school, or device provision purposes.
- You'd like training on modeling strategies for the whole family or classroom team.
- A speech-language therapist (SLT/SLP) can build an individualized AAC plan around this toolkit.

*** See [NeuroReHub's Medical & Health Professionals directory](#) to find a specialist near you.