



Evidence-based Practices for Individuals with Autism, Intellectual Disability, and Related Disabilities

Understanding the Augmentative Effect of Augmentative and Alternative Communication



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Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) can replace or improve limited vocal communication repertoires of individuals with autism or other developmental disabilities (Blischak, 1999). Despite the benefits of using AAC to supplement speech production, families and professionals have expressed hesitation to adopt AAC as a communication modality, citing concerns that AAC will hinder vocal speech (Schlosser & Wendt, 2008). In order to improve intervention services for individuals with limited vocal repertoires, practitioners and families must understand the significant benefits of incorporating AAC into intervention plans.

What Is Augmentative and Alternative Communication?

Augmentative and Alternative Communication includes modes of communication that are used when individuals demonstrate limited or no vocal communicative responses. AAC modes are classified as unaided or aided (Schlosser & Wendt, 2008). Unaided AAC includes physical or gestural communicative responses, such as sign language (Schlosser & Wendt, 2008), while aided AAC includes the use of picture-based systems or speech-generating devices (SGD) (Schlosser & Wendt, 2008).

The use of AAC methods has demonstrated increases in functional communicative responses for individuals who have disabilities with limited vocal repertoires (Schlosser & Wendt, 2008). Such improvements may expand the ability for individuals with limited vocal abilities to communicate. AAC has also been shown to be an effective intervention to reduce the occurrence of challenging behaviors (Walker & Snell, 2013).

Despite the benefits of using AAC to promote functional communication, practitioners and families often delay adoption of AAC for fear that the individual's vocal communication skills will not progress (Schlosser & Wendt, 2008). However the literature suggests when AAC is implemented as an intervention, vocal communication skills may be enhanced (Millar, Light, & Schlosser, 2006). Further, there is no evidence that adopting an AAC will result in decreased vocal communication (Blischak, Lombardino & Dyson, 2003).

Evidence to Support AAC

Research supports the use of AAC as an effective intervention for individuals with limited communication (Schlosser & Wendt, 2008). In a systematic review of the effects of AAC intervention on speech production in children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), Schlosser & Wendt (2008) found that the majority of the 125 participants across 11 studies demon-

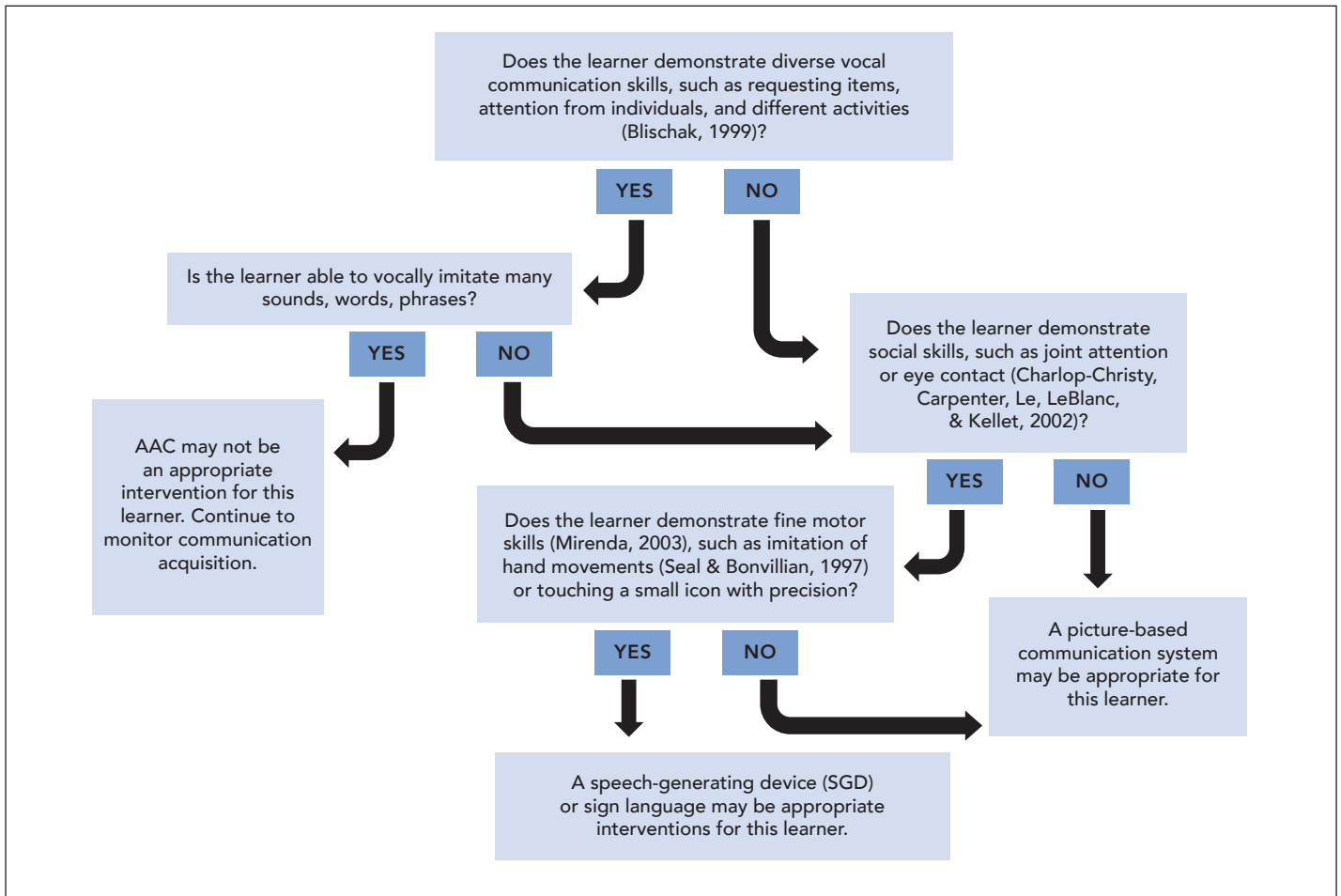


Figure 1. AAC Decision Tree

strated modest increases in speech production, and no participants showed a decrease in speech production.

Given the vast amount of research to support the use of AAC, teachers, parents, and professionals should not be concerned about negative effects of AAC on speech production (e.g., Gevarter et al., 2016; Greenberg, Tomaino, & Charlop, 2013; Kasari et al., 2014; Roche et al., 2014). However, care should be taken when choosing an appropriate system that meets the needs of the child and family.

Evaluating the Need for Augmentative Devices

Prior to selecting a mode of communication, a professional who has experience with modes of communication should assess the individual’s current skills. The assessment information will help determine which AAC is best aligned with the needs of the individual. Figure 1 depicts details and considerations when selecting an AAC method.

The final consideration is satisfaction with the selected mode. Research suggests that aided systems are more preferred than unaided systems (Gevarter et al., 2016). However, both families and the individual using the device must be satisfied in order to promote sustained use. Permit the individual the opportunity to select a preferred mode and discuss such adoption with primary communication partners (Blackstone, Williams, & Wilkins, 2007). Without support from primary communication partners, the chances of AAC abandonment can increase (Blackstone et al., 2007).

Conclusions

Augmentative and Alternative Communication can increase and expand an individual’s communication skills. As such, the use of AAC methods should not be considered a last resort intervention, but instead should be recognized for enhancing language capabilities and introduced early to promote communication. ■

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