

# Other Ways of Speaking

Supporting children and young people who have no  
speech or whose speech is difficult to understand



The Communication Trust  
Every child understood



*More than just talking...*

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# Why should I read this booklet?

Being able to communicate is the most important skill we need in life. Almost everything we do involves communication; everyday tasks such as learning at school, ordering food and drink, sorting out problems, making friends and having fun all rely on our ability to communicate with each other.

Most communication is through speaking to others either face to face or remotely, such as on the phone. However, some people have difficulty with using speech and they need to use different ways to communicate.

It is estimated that 0.5% of the UK population require some type of AAC. The population of potential AAC users has a broad range of complex conditions with different underlying medical diagnoses both congenital and acquired. Of that group 10% will need high tech AAC solutions i.e. approximately 0.05% of the UK population require and would benefit from powered communication aids.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Enderby, P., et al (2013) Beyond the Anecdote: Examining the need for, and provision of, AAC in the United Kingdom. Research commissioned by Communication Matters as part of the AAC Evidence Base research project and undertaken by the University of Sheffield.”

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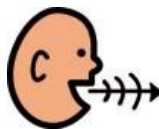
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This short booklet provides information about children and young people who use a variety of different ways to communicate, how you can help support them and where to go for further information. You should read this booklet if you live or work with children and young people whose speech is difficult to understand or who have no speech.

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This booklet is not aimed at children with deafness or hearing loss except where it is a factor of other impairments that may also contribute to communication difficulties.

Throughout this booklet you will see examples of symbols, signs and other methods which some people use to communicate, such as the ones below.



# How does communication work?

Communication is about people exchanging messages. For communication to be successful, people must be able to understand the meaning of these messages and take part themselves.

For those people who have difficulties with speech, have limited speech, or physically can't speak, communication can be a challenge. Sometimes the process breaks down and when this happens we need to think of other ways to support speech.

We all use different ways of communicating to help support messages we're trying to get across. For example, when giving directions to someone we may point to where they need to go or when ordering in a noisy restaurant we may add a gesture for 'drink'. Our spoken message is supported by a gesture or visual clue to help people see what we mean.

Some children and young people need this support all the time if they are to have any effective communication. This may be because they have difficulty speaking and their listener does not understand their spoken message. Speaking difficulties could be due to many factors, may be temporary or permanent and may be due to:

- a speech difficulty
- a learning difficulty
- a physical difficulty, for example due to cerebral palsy
- a brain injury due to accident or illness
- an autistic spectrum disorder

The needs of children and young people who have difficulties speaking must be identified as soon as possible to ensure they receive the best support as they face the challenges of learning to communicate. This booklet explores a large number of ways that their communication can be supported.

A common term that's used when defining what kinds of additional help some children and young people need is Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC). This is used to describe the different ways of communicating, either to support speaking (augmentative) or instead of speaking (alternative).

# What is Augmentative and Alternative Communication?



Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) describes a wide range of techniques children and young people can use to support spoken communication. These include gesture, signing, symbols, word boards, communication boards and books, as well as Voice Output Communication Aids (VOCAs).

### There are two main types of AAC systems:

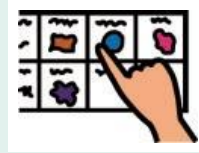
1. **Unaided communication** refers to methods that do not involve additional equipment. They use what a person already has available to them - their face, hands and body to share their message. These methods include body language and facial expression, pointing and signing.



2. **Aided communication** can be 'low-tech' or 'high-tech' and refers to methods which involve additional equipment, such as a picture or symbol chart or book, a talking computer or a Voice Output Communication Aid.



**Low-tech aids** generally refer to any AAC system which does not need a battery to work. This may be everyday objects, communication books with pictures, symbols or photos, alphabet charts and even pen and paper.



**High-tech aids** need a battery to work and cover a variety of AAC systems. These make use of whatever physical movement the user can control, whether that's their hands, feet, head or eyes. High-tech aids enable the child or young person to make choices and create messages using pictures, symbols, words or letters that can be linked to an electronic voice.



There is no 'best' type of AAC system. Each has advantages and disadvantages and the most suitable one for a child or young person will depend on their abilities and needs as well as their personal preference. Specialist assessment will help to identify the most appropriate AAC system or systems.

There are a number of specialist assessment services across the UK who assess the communication and educational needs of children and young people who have severe communication impairments. Details can be found on Communication Matters website, [www.communicationmatters.org.uk/about-aac](http://www.communicationmatters.org.uk/about-aac).

**What are some of the different ways to support speech?**

## Body language and facial expressions

Many people add meaning to what they are saying through using facial expressions such as smiling or frowning, and gestures such as waving goodbye or nodding their head.

For children and young people who find speech difficult, have limited or no speech, facial expression and gestures can become a very important way to help them get their message across.

Some children with physical impairments may find facial expression and gestures difficult and may have their own unique ways to express what they say, for example, looking down may be a no, smiling may be a yes. It is important that the listener takes time to find out what the young person's preferred method is and to be consistent with what they use.



## Signing support

Signing is a way of using your hands to make different movements and shapes to communicate. It can also help some people understand what's being said to them. Signing can be used alongside or instead of speech.

To make communication effective, everyone must learn what signs mean and learn to make signs themselves. There are different signing systems in use in the UK, more information on these systems and where to get training is available at [www.communicationmatters.org.uk/page/signing-systems](http://www.communicationmatters.org.uk/page/signing-systems).

Example signing systems:

Makaton Programme

Paget Gorman (PGSS)

Signalong

Signed English

British Sign Language (BSL)

British Sign Language is a language in its own right. Deaf children will benefit significantly from specialist support and regular contact with people who are native or fluent users of British Sign Language, or other appropriate systems/approaches.

## Symbol support

Symbols are all around us. They're used as road signs to help us drive safely, on food labels to help us choose what to eat and on computers and mobile phones to help us select the programme we want to use. Symbols can also be used by people who find speech difficult to help them communicate effectively.

There are many different symbol systems in use around the UK, but they all represent what you want to say in a picture format. As each symbol system has different features, it is important to choose the right one for the person using the symbols. Examples of some are included throughout this booklet.

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Katie's speech is difficult for many people to understand. She has started to use symbols and pictures to let people know what she wants. Her mum was delighted yesterday when Katie pointed to the photograph of their garden to let her know she wanted to go outside.

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Symbols can be arranged on communication boards, in communication books or on a computer screen so the person using them can choose the symbol they need to indicate what they want to say. Sometimes a symbol has the word written underneath or above it which helps if the 'listener' is not familiar with all the symbols.

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Sahaan uses symbols to help with his communication and learning in class. He points to symbols from different pages in his communication book to say "I go Grandma's" to let people know where he is going after school.

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## Eye-pointing

Eye-pointing can be very useful for those who find it difficult to use their hands and arms to sign or point. Eye-pointing means letting someone know what you want by looking hard at the object you want or by looking at pictures, letters or words placed in front of you.

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Lily has cerebral palsy and finds using her hands to point very difficult; however she is learning to use her eyes to make choices. Her teaching assistant asks all the children to choose a drink at break time and there are four different flavours available. Lily sits facing her teaching assistant who is holding up pictures of the 4 drinks. By looking clearly at the picture of milk Lily tells the teaching assistant which drink she wants.

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## Written messages

If the child or young person with a speech difficulty can spell, the use of an alphabet chart or keyboard can help them to communicate. Using a keyboard on a laptop, personal organiser or mobile phone can also be used to spell out messages for others to read. If they find reading difficult then special software is available that enables a computer to speak the words that are typed into it.

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Pedro had a head injury 5 years ago, which has affected his speech, making him difficult to understand for some people. When he goes to the shops to take back a shirt he takes his phone with him and uses it to type in what he wants.

He shows this message to the lady at the counter who has not understood what he has said. She reads the message “*Have you got this in a larger size?*” and she goes to look for another shirt for Pedro.

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## Voice Output Communication Aids (VOCAs)

VOCAs include a wide range of devices that have been designed to help people unable to speak. A VOCA produces spoken words to help the user get their message across.

VOCAs all work in different ways. For example, some store words or phrases and allow the user to put together messages which are then spoken out by the device. There are a number of different types of VOCAs available and it is essential to seek independent professional advice to ensure that the child is getting the right machine to meet their individual needs.

**What are the  
benefits of using  
alternative ways  
to communicate?**

For children and young people who rely on using different methods of communication it can have a dramatic impact on their lives.

It can enable them to:

- express their feelings
- ask questions and say what they need
- feel good about themselves
- develop relationships with their family and friends
- participate in school, work and play
- be involved in decisions about their future
- live an independent life
- gain employment

For a lot of children and young people it allows them to live their lives to the full and have the same life opportunities as any other person.

### **Real life stories**

The following stories are about children and young people who use different methods of communication and the journey they and their families have taken.

## Sophie's story

Sophie is three years old. When she was a baby, Sophie did not babble like other babies, instead she communicated by crying and screaming. Sophie's mother found it difficult to explain what was wrong with Sophie, only that she was so different from her two older brothers. At one and a half, she was referred for speech and language therapy.

When they met with the speech and language therapist it was suggested that Sophie would benefit from therapy that would teach her and her mother how to sign to help her communicate.

This therapy has been fantastic for Sophie and her mother and taught them how to communicate with each other by signing. Their confidence grows as they learn more signs and have successful interaction.



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### Benefits of Sophie using this method of communication

Sophie can now communicate with her mother and they have started to develop a mother/daughter relationship that was previously missing. Sophie can express her likes and dislikes and her sense of humour. Her brothers have been able to get involved and now they all use signing with Sophie and teach her new signs. In a little over a year Sophie has learnt to sign over 100 words.

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## Callum's story

Callum is three years old, all areas of his development are delayed and he has low muscle tone which affects his ability to walk and talk. He was able to understand what he heard but had no way of communicating what he wanted or needed.

His speech and language therapist and mother started work on using symbols for Callum to choose what he wanted at home and school. At two and a half he was given a simple electronic communication aid, which brought voice to the symbols. By pressing the picture on his communication aid Callum can make choices and 'say' what he wants.



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### Benefits of Callum using this method of communication

Very quickly Callum was able to communicate with the rest of the children in his nursery class and get them to sing the song he chose or listen to the story he wanted. Now he uses a range of ways to communicate including his communication aid, some words and signs and facial expressions. The family find having a range of skills they can use for different situations has helped Callum take control.

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## Jeon's story

Jeon is 4 years old and was born prematurely. His first years saw him struggle with significant health issues and so far he has developed no speech beyond one or two simple sounds, however his understanding of what is said to him is excellent.

Jeon was referred to the local Child Development Centre before he was one year old, and he was seen by a range of professionals including a community paediatrician, a speech and language therapist and an occupational therapist.

At the Child Development Centre it became clear the reason Jeon struggled with speech was because he has severe speech dyspraxia, which means he has difficulty in making and co-ordinating the precise movements needed for speech. This affects individual speech sounds and in sequencing sounds together in words, making speech very unclear. On the therapist's advice the family started to use a combination of signing and symbols together with speech.



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### Benefits of Jeon using these methods of communication

Jeon can now ask for things using signing and symbols to support his speech when it is difficult to understand and he can give clues about why he's upset. Using symbols and signs has opened up communication for the entire family.

Jeon's parents found meeting other parents at the Child Development Centre and at the workshops a great support.

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## Jenni's story

Jenni is 17, she has cerebral palsy, uses a wheelchair and is unable to walk. She understands everything that is said to her but cannot communicate with speech so she indicates “yes” and “no” by nodding and shaking her head. Jenni has also learned to point with her eyes to vocabulary in a specially designed communication book as a way of communicating.

To develop her communication Jenni was provided with a Voice Output Communication Aid (VOCA) when she was 10, which she controlled using a specially made switch that looks like a grab bar. Jenni pulls the switch to start the device scanning through a range of choices on a vocabulary page and then pushes it to select the one she wants to use.

Jenni has also been able to test other equipment to find out what best meets her needs. She now also uses an eye pointing system, which amongst other functions, allows her to access and send e-mails and text messages.



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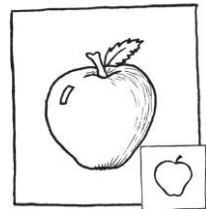
### Benefits of Jenni using this method of communication

Now Jenni has access to a range of communication support systems Jenni is able to live a more independent life and will be starting college in the autumn.

## Tamil's story

Tamil is 6 years old and has severe learning difficulties. It became clear early on that he had significant difficulties with all aspects of learning and communication. Tamil was assessed when he was a baby at a Child Development Centre and was offered a place at weekly therapy and support sessions for children with learning disabilities. Tamil also attended a signing session once a week.

Tamil is now at school and has developed his use of signing. The school also uses symbols to help the children complete tasks such as reading and writing and Tamil's understanding of this method is progressing well. He can now select a symbol from a small choice, and with help he can stick the symbol on to his picture. The school have offered training sessions for the whole family so now everyone is involved.



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### Benefits of Tamil using this method of communication

Tamil's parents and carers use signing to help him understand general instructions or questions. His parents are extremely pleased with the progress he is making with communication and learning.



# How can I support someone who uses Augmentative and Alternative Communication?

Talking with someone who uses AAC for the first time can be a little daunting. Will I understand them? Will they understand me? What will I do if it goes wrong?

Overleaf, we have put together ten tips to help you support the communication process.

## 10 tips for making communication successful

- 1 Reduce background noise.**  
Choose a quiet place so you can both concentrate on the conversation.
- 2 Face the person you are talking to and make eye contact.**  
However, remember not all children and young people will be happy, or able, to look you in the eye. Those with autism may find this particularly difficult and young people using some sort of communication aid or book/board will have to look at what they are doing.
- 3 Tell them if it is the first time you have met and talked to a person who uses an alternative method of communication.**  
This will give the other person the opportunity to show you the best way to communicate with each other.
- 4 Ask them what helps.**  
Ask them to show you how they use their AAC system to help you understand what, if anything, you need to do to make communication successful.
- 5 Establish how they communicate 'yes' and 'no'.**  
This may not always be the obvious nod and shake of the head.

- 6 When you ask a question wait for a reply.  
This sounds obvious but for some people it may take them longer to reply than you may usually wait for an answer.
- 7 Be patient.  
Sometimes it can be tempting to finish off a person's sentence for them and some welcome this as a way of speeding up communication. However, others may find this annoying so always ask if the other person is happy for you to do this.
- 8 Always be honest about how much of the conversation you have understood.  
This will give the other person opportunity to explain points that have not been understood, or ask for support.
- 9 If you don't have enough time, then agree to meet later.  
You will need to give time to the conversation.
- 10 Check back and recap.  
When finishing a conversation, make sure that you both agree you have said all what you wanted to and check you have both understood everything that was communicated.

## General advice

### Start with a detailed assessment

Ensure each child or young person has a detailed assessment, for more information go to

[www.communicationmatters.org.uk/about-aac](http://www.communicationmatters.org.uk/about-aac).

### Ensure access to AAC at all times

Children and young people who use AAC must have access to it all the time. Without it they can feel isolated and excluded from those around them.

### Use symbols

Seeing symbols on the walls and doors of classrooms can help children learn the link between the symbol and what it stands for. This use of symbols can enable children and young people to learn symbols and to encourage them to use them for communication. This can also help those whose first language is not English and people who have specific difficulties with literacy.

### Use signs

Using signs gives a visual picture of the meaning or instruction, which helps understanding and makes communication easier.

## Meet with other AAC users and their families

Providing opportunities for young people who use AAC and their families to meet with other users to share their experiences can be invaluable. They can talk to them about the challenges they face but also what is helpful to them. Adults using AAC can also be fantastic role models for these children.

## Support families of AAC users

Families of children using AAC also need support to help their own children reach their full potential. Without the family being on board the chances of successful communication can be very limited.

## Keep AAC up to date as children grow older

Needs change as children grow older so it is important to regularly review the type of AAC they use to make sure it continues to meet the needs of the child.

**Where can I  
find further  
information?**

## General information



Communication Matters champions the needs of people of all ages who would benefit from AAC, whatever their condition or geographic location. As a charitable organisation members include people who use AAC and their families, support workers, professionals working in the field as well as manufacturers and distributors of communication systems.

Established in 1986 as the UK branch of the International Society of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (ISAAC), it has expertise, knowledge and skills, an international reputation and network to support all people involved in the field of AAC across the UK.

Communication Matters achieves its aims through key activities: training events (an annual conference, study days, free road shows involving commercial members), a research programme, a range of resources and publications including a journal, E-news and an E-library, discussion forums, local networks, and website. The website is an up to date source of information for anybody wanting to learn more about AAC.

For more information please go to [www.communicationmatters.org.uk](http://www.communicationmatters.org.uk) or call 0845 456 8211.





The Communication Trust consists of nearly 50 voluntary sector organisations that bring together their expertise to ensure that the speech, language and communication needs of all children and young people are met. This is through signposting to specialist training, support and guidance for people working with children. For more information please go to [www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk](http://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk)



Talking Point, has a range of information about speech, language and communication development, speech, language and communication needs and ways to support children and young people including information on AAC.

[www.talkingpoint.org.uk](http://www.talkingpoint.org.uk)

[www.talkingpoint.org.uk/talkinglinks](http://www.talkingpoint.org.uk/talkinglinks) is a database of services which support children and young people's communication development. The database is searchable by postcode and includes the contact details of how to find local speech and language therapy services.

The Speech, Language and Communication Framework (SLCF) outlines what people who work with children and young people need to know and be able to do in order to support children's communication. For more information about the SLCF go to [www.talkingpoint.org.uk/slcf](http://www.talkingpoint.org.uk/slcf)



The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, has information about the work and expertise of speech and language therapists. Parents or school staff can refer directly to a speech and language therapist if a referral for further assessment is needed. [www.rcslt.org.uk](http://www.rcslt.org.uk)

## Specialist AAC Services

It may also be useful to contact your local assessment centre listed on the Communication Matters website for advice, [www.communicationmatters.org.uk/page/resources/aac-assessment-services](http://www.communicationmatters.org.uk/page/resources/aac-assessment-services). They may also hold information days.

# Credits

Other Ways of Speaking has been produced in partnership by Communication Matters, The Communication Trust, 1Voice, ACE Centre, The Makaton Charity, Scope and Signalong.

## Thank you to:

The organisations involved in producing this publication for their contributions and the families who provided information on their stories for this booklet.

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