**Augmentative and alternative communication for autistic children**

**Source-** raising children.net.au (This website provides **free, reliable, up-to-date and independent information** to help families grow and thrive together. It is funded by the Australian Government, reviewed by experts and non-commercial.)

Autistic children can have difficulties understanding or using spoken language. Some might have a language delay. Communication and language can sometimes be hard for them even after they’ve tried language development programs.

Therefore, they might need help to develop spoken language, or they might benefit from a range of options for communicating and understanding communication, including speech, gestures or writing.

This is where augmentative and alternative communication can help.

**If you introduce an augmentative and alternative communication system as early as possible, your child is more likely to use it to communicate.**

**Augmentative and alternative communication systems**

Augmentative and alternative communication systems pair tasks, actions, objects or concepts with pictures or hand signs. For example, an apple is paired with the hand sign for apple. The spoken word for the task, action, object or concept is used at the same time as the picture or hand sign.

There are two types of augmentative and alternative communication systems – **unaided and aided.**

**Unaided augmentative and alternative communication systems don’t need any equipment.** They use gestures and hand signs to support speech, or as the main way of communicating. For example, they might use Key Word Sign.

**Aided augmentative and alternative communication systems can be low-tech or high-tech:**

* **Low-tech systems** use equipment like cards, boards or books with photos or pictures that represent tasks, actions or objects. Autistic children can learn to use these tools to understand what people are saying, ask for what they need, make comments and answer other people’s questions. Picture Exchange Communication Systems (PECS) and visual timetables are examples.
* **High-tech systems** include speech-generating devices. There are also many apps to help children develop communication skills.

**How augmentative and alternative communication systems help autistic children:**

Augmentative and alternative communication systems can be **an effective way for children to learn and use early words**. That’s because children remember the speech sounds and the visual image of the object, picture or hand sign that’s paired with the word. This is likely to help autistic children who respond best to information that’s presented visually.

Augmentative and alternative communication systems can also **improve children’s understanding of words.** This is because speech on its own can be very quick, whereas a visual image lasts longer and often stays still, giving children more time to understand the information. Also, people tend to slow down when they’re using visual aids or hand signs. For example they slow down to recall a specific hand sign, find the right picture, add emphasis, or ensure the child has seen the whole message. This all gives children more time to understand the information and helps children avoid information overload.

**Augmentative and alternative communication systems help your child communicate their needs and wants in appropriate and positive ways. Because these systems improve understanding between you and your child, they can reduce anxiety and stress. Less stress and better communication can add up to a stronger relationship between you and your child, and between your child and their siblings, peers and carers.**

**Choosing augmentative and alternative communication systems for autistic children:**

The augmentative and alternative communication system you choose will depend on a few things, including your child’s strengths and needs, the current stage of your child’s communication development, and your ability to use the system consistently. It’s important that your family and your child’s other carers are also able to use the system.

Here are some questions to think about when you’re choosing an augmentative and alternative communication system:

* Is the system a temporary support for your child until their spoken language develops, or is it likely to become your child’s main way of communicating?
* Is your child physically capable of using the system? For example, does your child have the fine motor control for hand signs?
* Does the system suit your child’s strengths and needs? For example, does your child learn better using photos or symbols?
* Is the system portable?
* Can your child learn the system easily?
* Are there financial considerations?
* How likely is it that other people, like teachers and friends, will learn and use the system?
* What systems are used at your child’s preschool, kindergarten or early intervention service?

Children who have a limited range of interests or who have repetitive behaviour can get ‘stuck’ on electronic devices, so it’s a good idea to think about your child’s behaviour before introducing an electronic augmentative and alternative communication system. Your child could have one device with only the augmentative and alternative communication software on it, and a separate one to use for games and entertainment.

**Therapies and supports to improve communication for autistic children:**

Therapies and supports that can develop autistic children’s communication skills include the following:

* **Visual supports and strategies:** these use symbols, photographs, written words and objects to help autistic children improve their skills in processing information, using language, and understanding and interacting with the world around them.
* **Functional Communication Training (FCT):** this focuses on replacing difficult behaviour with more appropriate communication that serves the same purpose as the behaviour. For example, a child might have a meltdown when they want a toy but can’t ask for it. In FCT, the child would be taught how to ask for the toy in a more appropriate way.
* **More Than Words:** this focuses on promoting autistic children’s language development. It’s also known as The Hanen Program.