

ARE WE APPROACHING AAC MODELING ALL WRONG?

Lessons from Early Language Development and “Motherese”

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What is AAC Modeling?

- AAC modeling means we are teaching words and how they work.
- We show that AAC is a valid and accepted way to communicate.
- We demonstrate or show a skill on AAC by drawing attention to certain symbols.
- We connect AAC symbols to meaningful people, items, feelings, or experiences.

The field of AAC has ample research supporting modeling as a foundational component of AAC implementation (Allen et al., 2017; O'Neill et al., 2018; Sennott et al., 2016).

Why We Model AAC

Children learn to communicate by hearing and seeing language used for real reasons, many times, across many situations. AAC learners are no different. They need to see and hear language represented on their AAC system, used meaningfully and naturally, before they can use it expressively themselves.

Why We Looked at Current Practices

- Data and feedback showed that not enough AAC modeling was happening.
- Programs like core word of the week repeated the same small sets of words year after year—without building toward more complex language.
- Adult AAC users challenged common habits, such as talking over the device or simplifying grammar, because these practices made AAC sound less like real communication.

Together, these insights showed us a gap between our intentions and the kind of language AAC learners actually need to hear. To build stronger communicators, we needed to model the language we want them to understand and use—full, connected messages that reflect how people really talk.

What We Learned from Language Development and AAC Experts

Research in early language development (Hart & Risley; Vygotsky; Justice, Cabell & Zucker; NAEYC) shows that children learn through rich, responsive interaction—environments filled with meaningful talk, shared attention, and emotional connection. AAC research (Goossens', Crain & Elder; Light & McNaughton; Senner & Baud) echoes the same message: consistent, aided language input strengthens understanding and participation.

In early development, infants tune into language that is exaggerated, emotionally expressive, and closely tied to shared experiences—often called “motherese” or infant-directed speech. This natural style of communication emphasizes rhythm, melody, and connection, helping babies link sounds to meaning. Modeling with AAC applies the same principle: language that is slowed down, emotionally engaging, and shared builds understanding and attention.

Across both fields, the message is clear: language grows when adults model complete, natural messages during shared experiences and connection. This finding echoes what decades of early childhood and literacy research have already shown about how children learn best — through rich, responsive environments where language is modeled, shared, and meaningful.

What We Know About Language-Rich Environments

Across decades of research, experts in early childhood and literacy describe remarkably similar conditions for language growth: frequent and varied input, shared attention, emotional connection, and opportunities to hear and use language for real reasons.

AAC fits squarely within these same principles.

When adults model full, meaningful messages on the device, they provide the same kind of rich input and responsive interaction that language-development experts have always championed. Using AAC to label, comment, question, and narrate connects precisely with what these frameworks define as “language-rich.”

AAC doesn’t replace early language practices—it **extends them**. When we model language on a device, we are doing what great teachers and caregivers have always done: making language visible, shared, and meaningful.

A Research-Aligned Model of AAC

This model brings together what works from both AAC research and early language development. It focuses on modeling complete, natural messages that build understanding first—not just expression.

Traditional approaches often asked partners to “model what you want the learner to say.” While well-intentioned, this can limit input to short or simplified phrases. A research-aligned model reframes modeling as **language exposure, not performance**. The goal is to make sure learners hear and see the kind of language they are expected to learn—through the AAC system itself.

1 Model complete messages.

Instead of isolating single words, partners model full, meaningful messages that mirror how people actually communicate. This helps learners hear syntax, rhythm, and intent—key ingredients for language growth.

2 Let the device speak first.

When the device “goes first,” it captures attention and invites curiosity. This turns modeling into a shared moment of discovery rather than a test of skill.

3 Model for connection, not correction.

Modeling is about participation, not performance. By focusing on shared experiences and connection, partners build trust, motivation, and emotional safety—the foundation for confident communication.

Key Takeaways

AAC modeling is not about pressing buttons—it's about growing language through connection.

When we looked closely at current practices, we saw too little modeling, too much simplification, and not enough real communication. Research in both early language development and AAC shows that growth happens when learners experience rich, responsive interaction.

A research-aligned perspective reframes modeling as **receptive input first**—where adults model full, natural messages, let the device speak first, and focus on connection instead of correction.

Whether spoken or aided, language grows through the same core ingredients: shared attention, emotional connection, and responsive modeling—the same foundations that make “motherese” so powerful.

Language doesn't grow in drills or fragments—it grows in moments of shared meaning. That's the heart of effective AAC modeling.

Steps AAC Modeling in Action

1. Join in or invite attention
2. Model a complete message using AAC
3. Wait — the “Perfect Pause”
4. Recognize any response as their turn
5. Model again if there's no response
6. End when the child ends it

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