

Handout, Communication Matters, September 2025

# PART-TIME AAC USE

---

What does it mean and why does it matter?

*Alyssa Hillary Zisk, PhD, AAC Research Team Lead, AssistiveWare*

# Describing Autistic Experiences of Speech

(Adapted from Zisk, 2024a)

## Intermittent speech

With intermittent speech, an autistic person can speak some of the time but not all of the time (Sparrow, 2017). Intermittent speech intentionally does *not* get into the reasons for this, which can vary, whereas selective mutism is specifically an anxiety thing. For some, speech can be a finite resource in need of rationing. Others may be able to speak most of the time, but lose speech around physical illness, sensory overload, or meltdowns (Zisk & Dalton, 2019).

## Unreliable speech

With unreliable speech, words come out that don't match the intended meaning (Sparrow, 2017). Not all scripts are unreliable, and not all unreliable speech is scripted — but accidental script use is an easy example of unreliable speech. A repeated word, phrase, or even longer chunk of language that matches what was said to someone but not their current situation would be an example of unreliable speech. For example, when someone asks, “How are you?” it's easy to answer, “I'm fine, thanks, and you?” But if that automatic response comes out while waiting to be seen in the emergency room, it's a problem!

Other examples of unreliable speech can include verbal tics, in which a person makes sounds (possibly words) that aren't entirely voluntary, repeating the last answer of a multiple-choice question, or word substitutions that change the meaning of what we say.

## Insufficient speech

When autistic people experience insufficient speech, they can say some things, and those things are true. They might even be related to what they want to say. But there are so many other things they can't say (Zisk & Dalton, 2019). Sometimes, this means being able to speak imprecisely (but not incorrectly) using scripts, such as using spoken language to say “Houston, we have a problem.” However, with AAC, it might be possible to specify “I need help” or even describe the problem and the needed help. The script fits the situation. It's certainly not wrong. But there is more imprecision and more space for misunderstandings with “Houston, we have a problem” than with “I need help!” It's insufficient.

## Expensive speech

With expensive speech, speech is tiring! Speaking requires the coordination of very complicated movements, and even if it's mostly automatic, it can take a lot of energy, focus, or any other kind of internal resource. Maybe speech would have been effective, and maybe it wouldn't have, but either way using AAC may help someone with expensive speech save that energy for later (corbin, 2025).

## Connections between these experiences

Autistic people with one of these experiences often have some of the others, too. The *reasons* speech can be insufficient or unreliable have a lot of overlap, and expensive speech can lead to any of the others as someone gets more tired.

## Supporting these experiences with AAC

### Consistently meeting communication needs

People need to be able to meet all communication needs, across all environments. This means communication supports are needed in any environments or situations where that isn't already happening — day to day or environment to environment variability in how well someone's communication needs are being met can tell us where more supports are needed.

# The Communication Bill of Rights

Regardless of disability or severity, all people have the right to...

Affect, through communication, the conditions of their existence

Interact socially, maintain social closeness, and build relationships

Request desired objects, actions, events, and people

Refuse or reject undesired objects, actions, events, or choices

Express personal preferences and feelings

Make choices from meaningful alternatives

Make comments and share opinions

Ask for and give information, including information about changes in routine and environment

Be informed about people and events in one's life

Access interventions and supports that improve communication

Have communication acts acknowledged and responded to even when the desired outcome cannot be realized

Have access to functioning AAC and other AT services and devices at all times

Access environmental contexts, interactions, and opportunities that promote participation as full communication partners with other people, including peers

Be treated with dignity and addressed with respect and courtesy

Be addressed directly and not be spoken for or talked about in the third person while present

Have clear, meaningful, and culturally and linguistically appropriate communications (Brady et al., 2016)

# Getting AAC

Unfortunately, getting AAC is the hard part. It is common for someone in the decision-making chain to presume a person is either too disabled to be able to use AAC effectively or has too much speech to *need* it.

In the USA, some evidence suggests that most autistic adults who use both AAC and substantial amounts of speech do not get formal AAC evaluations (Rayl et al., 2024). While funding mechanisms differ between the USA and the UK, this is likely the case in both countries (and many more besides). However, funding following AAC evaluations is at least sometimes possible (Koerner et al., 2023; Rayl et al., 2024). Successful funding for explicitly part-time AAC use has used:

- Safety concerns re: being able to communicate at all times
- Safety concerns re: being able to communicate in all situations/environments
- Reference to the Communication Bill of Rights (Brady et al., 2016)
- Self-report and/or multiple sessions to capture variability
- Self-report and/or multiple sessions to capture or deduce intermittent, unreliable, insufficient, and/or expensive speech

With the comparative availability of tablets and AAC software, as well as the ability to use mainstream software for AAC purposes on unlocked consumer devices, many autistic people also self-fund their own AAC tools. In this manner, people may trade money to get around gatekeeping for AAC in general or limitations on devices — people may use several different AAC tools on either a multipurpose device or a device that is dedicated to AAC but not to a single specific AAC app.

In some classrooms where either 1:1 tablets or some number of floating classroom tablets are available with AAC software on them, there are also some speaking autistic students who effectively identify *themselves* as benefitting from AAC. Given that speaking autistic adults who use AAC often identified themselves as benefiting from AAC, it is worth knowing that, given the opportunity, some autistic children can and will do the same.

# References & Resources

- Bottema-Beutel, Kristen, et al. "Conceptualizing and describing autistic language: Moving on from 'verbal', 'minimally verbal' and 'nonverbal'." *Autism* 29.6 (2025): 1367-1373. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613251332573>
- corbin, endever\*. "Speech is exhausting." *Augmentative and Alternative Communication* 41, no. 3 (2025): 245-247. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07434618.2025.2513907>
- Donaldson, Amy L., Alyssa Hillary Zisk, Brandon Eddy, endever corbin, Melissa Ugianskis, Erin Ford, and Olivia Strickland. "Autistic Communication: A Survey of School-Based Professionals." *Perspectives of the ASHA Special Interest Groups* 8, no. 6 (2023): 1248-1264. [https://doi.org/10.1044/2023\\_PERSP-23-00107](https://doi.org/10.1044/2023_PERSP-23-00107)
- Donaldson, Amy L., endever corbin, Alyssa Hillary Zisk, and Brandon Eddy. "Promotion of communication access, choice, and agency for autistic students." *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools* 54, no. 1 (2023): 140-155. [https://doi.org/10.1044/2022\\_LSHSS-22-00031](https://doi.org/10.1044/2022_LSHSS-22-00031)
- Donaldson, Amy L., endever corbin, and Jamie McCoy. "Everyone deserves AAC": Preliminary study of the experiences of speaking autistic adults who use augmentative and alternative communication." *Perspectives of the ASHA Special Interest Groups* 6, no. 2 (2021): 315-326. [https://doi.org/10.1044/2021\\_PERSP-20-00220](https://doi.org/10.1044/2021_PERSP-20-00220)
- Koerner, Susan Marjorie, Sarah Glaser, and Kirsten Kropkowski. "Perspectives of part-time augmentative and alternative communication use in adults and implications for pediatric service delivery." *Perspectives of the ASHA Special Interest Groups* 8, no. 4 (2023): 747-760. [https://doi.org/10.1044/2023\\_PERSP-22-00200](https://doi.org/10.1044/2023_PERSP-22-00200)
- Rayl, Karina, et al. "Exploring Speech Experiences, CPIB Scores, and AAC Assessment Experiences of Autistic AAC Users with Intermittent, Unreliable, Insufficient, and/or Expensive Speech." (2024). <https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/studentsymposium/2024/posters/29/>
- Sparrow, Maxfield. "Coping with a Crisis With Unreliable or Intermittent Speech." *Thinking Person's Guide to Autism*. <https://thinkingautismguide.com/2017/11/coping-with-crisis-intermittent-speech.html>
- Zisk, Alyssa Hillary. "Intermittent, unreliable, insufficient, and expensive speech." *AssistiveWare*. (2024a, October 24). <https://www.assistiveware.com/blog/intermittent-unreliable-insufficient-expensive-speech>
- Zisk, Alyssa Hillary. "Part-time AAC use: What does it mean and why does it matter?" *Archived USSAAC webinar (members only)*. (2024b, January 17). <https://isaac-online.org/english/members-only/archived-webinars-for-members-only/part-time-aac-use-what-does-it-mean-and-why-does-it-matter/>
- Zisk, Alyssa Hillary, et al. "School-Based Professionals' Knowledge of Autistic Speech and Augmentative and Alternative Communication Decision Making." *Seminars in Speech and Language*. Vol. 45. No. 05 (2024): 524-542. <https://doi.org/10.1055/s-0044-1793928>
- Zisk, Alyssa Hillary, and Elizabeth Dalton. "Augmentative and alternative communication for speaking autistic adults: Overview and recommendations." *Autism in Adulthood* 1, no. 2 (2019): 93-100. <https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2018.0007>