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SUPPORTING FAMILIES TO TEACH AAC AND LITERACY

Tina Lorenzana, Support Specialist

Literacy and AAC should not be exclusive. In fact, they complement each other and both allow access to communication and learning. While AAC provides the tool so that words are accessible, literacy opens up opportunities for learning, better communication and empowerment. When families integrate the use of AAC into literacy activities, growth spontaneously happens in the language and communication skills of our learners.

What makes an environment conducive to learning literacy?

In the book *Comprehensive Literacy for All* by Karen Erickson and David Koppenhaver, these are the components that are needed to create a literacy learning environment.

- Knowledgeable others (teachers, families, professionals and others who understand and support the students and believe in their capabilities).
- Means of communication and interaction (this is where robust AAC with access to keyboard comes in)
- Repetition with variety
- Cognitive engagement (students want to learn about the topic and share their thoughts)
- Cognitive clarity (students understand the reason for activities)
- Personal connection to the curriculum
- Encouragement of risk-taking
- Comprehensive instruction
- Significant time allocation (build up to two hours or more a day)
- High expectations

To determine which interventions are needed to support the learner, Karen Erickson recommends that these 4 questions need to be asked:

Does the learner:

1. Know most of the letters, most of the time?
2. Engage actively during shared reading?
3. Have a symbolic means of communication and interaction?
4. Understand that writing involves letters and words?

The answers will determine the type of interventions to be used for the learner. When one or more questions are answered No, emergent literacy interventions are recommended. When all the questions are answered Yes, conventional literacy interventions are preferred.

These are emergent literacy interventions:

- Shared reading
- Shared writing
- Alphabet instruction
- Phonological awareness
- Independent reading and writing

These are conventional literacy interventions:

- Reading Comprehension
- Writing
- Vocabulary Instruction
- Phonological awareness
- Phonics, decoding and spelling
- Self-directed reading

Based on these interventions, here are some activities that you can do with your learner:

Alphabet Instruction

- Teach one letter a day (not one letter a week).
- When teaching the name of the letter, have the student say the name of the letter with their thinking voice.
- Teach how the letter looks in both uppercase and lowercase forms.
- Find the letter in a keyboard or in a group of magnetic letters.
- Teach the sound the letter represents. Tell the student to say the sound with their thinking voice.
- Look for words that start with the letter of the day.
- After going through the whole alphabet, repeat the cycle but change it up.
- Read alphabet books and point out the letter of the day.
- Play alphabet puzzles or games and point out the letter of the day.
- Write down names of family or friends whose names start with the letter of the day.
- When out and about in the community, point out the letter of day.
- Use alphabet apps like Word Wizard.
- Use teaching apps like Micalo.

Reading

- In shared reading, use the CAR method - Comment, Ask, Response. Be sure to allow for sufficient wait times in between to allow the student to process and plan.
- In shared reading, use the CROWD method in the Ask portion of the CAR method. CROWD means Completion, Recall, Open Ended, Wh- question, Distancing.
- Model your response using AAC.
- In shared reading, focus on reading WITH the student and not TO them.

- Read books that interest your learner. You can also create a book based on their interests.
- Point out letters in the book e.g. letter of the day.
- Read printed books or ebooks. There are many platforms available including Monarch Reader that has a large selection of free books.
- Read age appropriate books.
- Use AAC to share comments, ideas, thoughts.
- Turn on captions for favorite videos.
- Talk about the images in the book.
- Show how sentences are read from left to right.
- Activate background knowledge. What do they know about the topic? Share what you know.
- Read aloud.

Phonics, Decoding and Spelling

- Manipulate and move letters to form words.
- Sort words with your student in different ways to identify spelling patterns e.g. same starting letter, same number of letters, same ending, same vowel.
- Use patterns in sorting words activity to spell new words.
- Use apps like Micalo for making and sorting words.
- Use magnetic letters.
- Prepare letter sets ahead of time.
- Create word walls. Do activities that utilize the words on the word walls e.g. fill in the blank or reading an unfamiliar word that sounds similar to a word on the wall.

Shared Writing

- Provide access to writing tools such as alphabet sets, letter stamps, writing toys for doodling, keyboards.
- In predictable chart writing, invite the student to add content to the structured sentence.
- Use high frequency or core words when writing the chart e.g. It is ____.
- Teach that sentences start with a capital and end with a period.
- Teach that a sentence is written and read from left to right.

Reading Comprehension

- Use anchor-read-apply.
- As an anchor activity, activate background knowledge of the student by sharing what they already know or have experienced, watch videos, do experiments related to the topic of the book.
- Set the purpose for reading the book and remind the student what the purpose is. Examples of purpose are predicting what's going to happen, sequencing, summarizing.

Vocabulary Instruction

- While reading, teach students new words and their related meaning.
- Use the new word in a sentence.
- Ask students to think about words that connect to the new word (word web).
- If a new word is not in the AAC, have the students use words already available to them in their AAC as a way to expand and connect to the new word.
- If a book only has simple basic words, it doesn't mean you have nothing to teach. Instead, introduce a new word or words related to those in the book.

Phonological awareness

- Read rhymes, poems, raps.
- Read books with repeating sentence patterns.

Writing

- Have students choose images related to a topic of their choice or a book they've read. Ask students to write their thoughts.
- Provide access to the alphabet.
- Write daily.
- Write lists, charts, letters, poems, postcards, reviews, and books.
- Have students write about a personal event.
- Celebrate their writing regardless of what they wrote and how they wrote it. Affirm what they wrote, and if they're able to, have the student verbalize what they wrote.
- Encourage students to write more by saying "Tell me more."

For more ideas on AAC and literacy, please see the following articles on AssistiveWare's blog:

[Integrating Literacy with AAC Instruction](#)

[Read and Write at Home with your AAC User](#)

References:

Erickson, K. A., & Koppenhaver, D. A. (2020). Comprehensive literacy for all: Teaching students with significant disabilities to read and write. Paul H. Brookes Publishing.