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USE IT BECAUSE IT WORKS:

Practical tools to increase AAC use through engagement

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Why this matters

Many AAC users have access to a system but do not use it consistently or meaningfully. As SLPs, we often respond by increasing prompting, reminders, or compliance-based expectations. While well-intentioned, these approaches frequently miss the core issue.

AAC engagement refers to the genuine motivation, enjoyment, and connection an AAC user experiences when using their communication system. It is the level of interest, interaction, and meaningful participation supported through AAC, where the user feels valued, understood, and empowered to communicate. Engaged AAC users are more likely to use their system spontaneously, consistently, and purposefully because it matters to them and supports real relationships, activities, and autonomy.

Where it can go wrong

"He doesn't even want to use his AAC?" Results in: Limited genuine communication opportunities, a structure that does not allow for flexible & fun interaction, and a lack of motivation to use AAC.

Engagement-based AAC support shifts the focus from:

- * Compliance → Connection
- * Prompting → Participation
- * Correct responses → Authentic communication & engagement

What engagement-based AAC support looks like

Engagement-based AAC intervention is grounded in the idea that communication is social before it is instructional.

It prioritizes:

- * Shared attention and interaction
- * Emotional connection and safety
- * Interest, novelty, humor, and play
- * Respect for autonomy and intent

AAC users are more likely to communicate when they feel:

- * Seen and heard
- * In control of the interaction
- * Safe to make mistakes
- * Confident their message will matter

Practical tools to increase AAC use

1. How can we model to support AAC engagement?

- Quality AAC modeling happens when we connect AAC symbols to meaningful people, items, feelings, and experiences.
- Invite AAC users to attend to the modeling, rather than demanding it.
- Do not expect them to imitate it immediately.
- Model things that matter, e.g., stories, jokes, chit-chat, favorite things, explore interesting words, etc.

Model - quality over quantity - the best AAC input is achieved when the person is engaged!

2. What floats their boat?

- Get to know their passions and interests
- Find their favorite things
- Build activities around this
- AAC modeling will focus on the language needed to engage in these topics
- Continue this engagement across the lifespan, at all ages

Quick ideas:

- Program vocabulary of interest areas into AAC
- Make books about favorite things
- Make books about themselves, using photos and cartoon images
- Increase motivation by showing them how to share from AAC - text messages, emails, saving messages, and AirDrop
- Explore new vocabulary and ideas
- Tell stories
- Make plans
- Program jokes into AAC

- Plan and play pranks
- Support to expand language to communicate new and different meanings
- Support them to learn to advocate for how they want to be supported
- Support them to make life plans

3. Using AAC during dysregulation

- Dysregulation can result from a lack of engagement, not being understood, or unmet needs.
- Behaviors caused by dysregulation are unsolved problems or come from unmet needs.
- Avoid forced interaction with AAC during times of dysregulation - “Tell me what’s wrong.”
- Instead, give space and time, and engage with AAC on the AAC user’s terms.
- Try safe space modeling:
 - Sit side by side at a distance that suits
 - Use NO speech; let the AAC do the talking
 - Be curious and reflective, and plan for what’s next
 - No pressure, and lots of patience and wait time
- Be sure that the AAC system has many personalized solutions and language

4. AAC refusal and rejection

- When an AAC user starts to refuse to use their AAC or push it away, it is not always time to change their AAC; it is more important to review their communication partner interactions and environment.
- It is likely time to rebuild engagement.
- Lower demands - avoid putting pressure on the AAC user to conform or to use AAC on demand
- Increase fun and engagement - focus on passions and interests.
- Provide lots of wait time.

- Follow their lead.

All people need a way to say powerful and important messages quickly. Being heard and understood can increase engagement.

- Program personalized, fast power words and phrases into AAC so that important things can be said quickly.
- Support AAC users in using language to advocate for themselves and have people listen.

Key takeaways for practice

- * Engagement is not an add-on: it is foundational. We need to design engaging interactions.
- * AAC use increases when communication is meaningful, effective, and relational.
- * When AAC helps someone be themselves, it becomes worth using.