



Alternative Paths To Literacy

Literacy support for children and
young people who use AAC



Introduction

This resource is the result of a Department for Education (DfE) funded project investigating the effective teaching of literacy to pupils who use Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC). As part of this project The Communication Trust conducted a national survey with practitioners and service providers about current practice. It also partnered with Janice Murray, Manchester Metropolitan University's Professor of Communication Disability (AAC) who completed a review of the current research literature, available on The Communication Trust's website and referenced throughout this resource. Finally, the project was informed by an advisory group of experts, who assisted in formulating the list of recommendations that form the basis of this resource.

Contents

- Recommendations for good practice pg 3
- Understand the common terminology used pg 4
- Set high expectations..... pg 6
- Work as a part of a well integrated team..... pg 8
- Case study: Molly pg 11
- Access support from training and networks pg 12
- Case study: Nicki pg 13
- Maximise literacy opportunities across the school day and daily life..... pg 14
- Case study: Willow Dene..... pg 15
- References, thanks, and more information..... pg 16

Recommendations for good practice

This area of education is extremely complex and different for every child. However, key themes from the research, survey and advisory group have resulted in five strong recommendations for all practitioners involved in supporting children who use AAC with literacy development.

- 1** Everyone working with the children and young people should understand the common terminology used. See pg 4-5.
- 2** Everyone working with the children and young people should have high expectations for literacy potential. See pg 6-7.
- 3** Everyone working with the children and young people should aim to work as part of a well integrated team to deliver high quality literacy instruction. See pg 8-11.
- 4** Everyone working with the children and young people should access further support from professional networks and training. This is critical for success. See pg 12-13.
- 5** Everyone working with children and young people should maximise the literacy opportunities across the school day and other environments. See pg 14-15.

Ask yourself:

Are you able to meet these recommendations? How can you overcome any barriers?



Understand the common terminology used

Recommendation 1

Many specialist terms are used in the field of AAC. Our first key recommendation is that practitioners understand their meanings. This will provide a common language with which to explore research, training and advice.

Only a few are listed here and practitioners may need to research terms that are useful for the children or young people they are supporting using a more comprehensive glossary.

AAC
Augmentative and Alternative Communication (**AAC**) is the term used to describe various methods of communication that are used to get around difficulties with speech. AAC includes simple systems such as pictures, gestures and pointing, as well as more complex techniques involving powerful computer technology.

Assistive technology
This includes any item or piece of equipment that is used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities.

Access Methods
These are the various methods of controlling an AAC device. Depending on an individual's physical abilities and needs, it is possible for a person to control an AAC device using various body parts and movements e.g. a slight movement of their foot, an eye blink or a movement of their head.

VOCA
A Voice Output Communication Aid (VOCA) is any device whose main function is to use output speech as a means of communication. VOCAs can range from simple single-message devices which use recorded speech, to complex computer-based systems which store many messages and use a computer-generated voice.

Literacy
In this context, literacy is used to describe reading, spelling and writing abilities, which may involve the formation of words using a communication aid.

Stages of literacy
These are the stages leading up to becoming a competent, independent reader and speller:

- The pre-literacy stage – for example recognising how to hold a book (front to back)
- The logographic stage – whole word recognition and the capacity to spell one's own name
- The alphabetic stage – the ability to apply letter-sound rules to decode real words
- Orthographic – decoding chunks of text such as prefixes and suffixes¹

Types of aid
Aided methods of augmentative communication may involve equipment which do not need batteries or power, these are commonly called 'low tech'. Aided communication also includes devices which need batteries or power and these are often referred to as 'high tech' or 'mid tech'.



Overwhelmingly, evidence tells us that young children with severe speech and physical difficulties are capable of early reading and writing. We know that with the right instruction and good access to assistive technology they can decode and identify words and take part in active book reading.²

Despite this the national survey told us that staff feel the expectations of children differ from one person to another and that that can lead to confusion over a child's potential or the aspirations for them.

According to research¹, quality literacy instruction for nonverbal children occurs when expectations of what children and young people who use AAC can achieve are high.²

In other words, children will only achieve, if we expect them to achieve.



Setting practitioners' expectations high

Practitioners can start by researching older children's success stories to give them an idea of what's possible.

- It is crucial to assume competence from the very beginning. Provide a language rich environment and lots of opportunities to practice and use literacy skills.
- Be aware that each child is individual and a certain diagnosis does not define their unique potential in terms of reading and writing.
- Challenge professional assumptions. No-one is in a position to say a child will or won't achieve.

Literacy can be taught at any age and stage. If progress hasn't occurred for a child or young person at the same time or rate as it has for their peers, that doesn't mean it's not happening.

Traditional measures of success might not work for children and young people who use AAC, so it's important to set smaller, realistic targets as they work towards bigger literacy goals. Remember, overall it may take them longer to get there than their peers.

Think about long term outcomes. Know what the child is good at and consider their potential if those skills are developed further.

Setting children's expectations high

Adults can help raise aspirations through their own interactions with the children or young people, and by ensuring that expectations are consistently high within the education setting. Pupils will have opportunities to demonstrate what they can do when adults provide resources that interest them, challenge them to build on their successes and protect and develop their self-esteem.

"Active involvement in the learning process or contextualised learning encourages social participation and a sense of achievement"⁴

Ensure that children and young people know what goals they are working towards and receive clear and useful feedback when they are doing what is needed or when they need to modify what they are doing.

Getting the assistive technology right

Having access to the right assistive technology can make all the difference in terms of setting the scene for literacy development; it can let the child or young person show us what they are really capable of. Without this, expectations and ultimately achievements are bound to remain lower than they should be.

Setting parents' expectations high

Research shows that parental beliefs and attitudes have an affect on how much children use their AAC systems, how well they use them and how much they relate to literacy development.²

Maintaining good links and relationships with parents, and particularly sharing their child's successes – big or small – is a good way to ensure that everyone is aware of what the child can achieve. Make it clear to parents that you have high expectations for their child's literacy skills, and that every achieved goal, no matter how small, is a step towards achieving good literacy skills.

Parents should be well supported by the education setting to formulate and define their expectations and aspirations, particularly when formulating and reviewing Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs).



A whole team of people with a wealth of knowledge can support an AAC user’s literacy learning directly or indirectly. Only when these people work together is it possible to understand a child’s individual challenges - be they functional, cognitive, or participatory, and then plan to reduce barriers to learning accordingly.

“Collaborative working ensures that the team can collectively understand the child’s challenges and strengths, and use this knowledge to adapt the curriculum accordingly.”²

Team knowledge and experience

Every individual member of the team has a unique contribution to make in understanding and learning about how **each particular** child or young person communicates and learns.

Parents as team members

Research shows that meaningful engagement with parents can improve literacy outcomes.² It is important to include the family in decisions about approaches to literacy and ensure they are trained and fully supported to continue their child’s education at home.

Recognising milestones

Collaborative working can also help team members see milestones in the process of literacy development which might not otherwise have been recognised², as shown in the example below.



Education, Health and Care Plans

A child or young person’s Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) should function to ‘pull everything together’, ensuring that all team members are familiar with the child’s literacy goals and why they were set.

It is therefore crucial that the EHCP is well written with appropriate goals. This requires a shared understanding within the team, and for the whole team to have been involved in decisions at all levels.

Children and young people as team members

It is critically important to ensure that children and young people are included in decisions about their learning, but this can be challenging for children who communicate using AAC. The Communication Trust’s Involving Children and Young People with SLCN Toolkit contains strategies and resources to help practitioners to overcome these challenges.

Turnover

The national survey revealed staff turnover can be a barrier to a child or young person’s literacy learning. Take appropriate measures to embed and cascade knowledge and skills about what works with an individual child or young person into the wider team and

setting, so that if a key team member leaves, the important work being done to support their literacy can continue.

Things to think about together:

- What are the long-term aspirations for this child or young person’s literacy skills?
- Have the child or young person’s views and aspirations been considered?
- What should be tried now?
- How long should it be tried for?
- Why is it being tried? Are the short term goals relevant to the long term aspirations?

Who is in your AAC and literacy team?

Table derived from Kirton, McLachlan & Elks (2013)³

Team Member	Role
Parents and carers	Knowledge of how the child uses their AAC system at home
Teachers	Knowledge of the curriculum
Speech and language therapist	Knowledge of the child’s understanding and communication strengths and weaknesses
Occupational therapist or physiotherapist	Advising on positioning and movement for use of AAC system
Clinical scientists or technologists	Advising on access methods, system design and integration
Support staff at school	Knowledge of how the child uses their AAC system at school
School based IT support, company representatives, charities & funding bodies	Support with troubleshooting and technical difficulties





Case Study

Molly is 12 and non verbal. She attends a special school and communicates using a voice output communication aid (VOCA) which she accesses using eye gaze. She can write her name using her communication aid, copy letters, and read a few words and symbols linked to a familiar vocabulary.

Molly has a specialist team supporting her to use the communication aid, and in turn to learn literacy skills. This includes her class teacher, 1:1 support from teaching assistants (TAs), and a specialist speech and language therapist (SLT) and occupational therapist who are in the classroom once a week.

A speech and language therapy assistant also helps by inputting vocabulary into her communication aid and the school's IT team have supported by updating the computers across the site so that the software Molly needed to use and maintain her communication aid could be installed. The team can also receive additional help from an assistive technologist and a clinical scientist to help with her access and positioning.

The SLT and assistive technologist have trained the whole class team and Molly's parents, on how to use the communication aid and members of the team have attended training courses. When Molly and her parents attended a conference, which covered techniques used to teach literacy skills, a TA and the department manager joined too and provided feedback to the rest of the team afterwards.

Like every child at her school, Molly has a completely individualised curriculum and profile for each area of learning. Goals are set and reviewed every six months by the team in multi-disciplinary team meetings (or more frequently if required) and make reference to the national strategies for the curriculum where they are relevant to that child. For example if a phonics strategy is working for the child, phonics goals are included. Activities the children work towards as part of their goals are made meaningful to the child through the teacher and class team's collaborative planning.

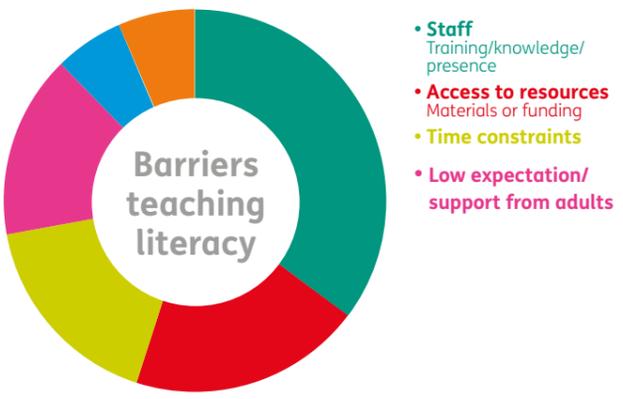


Access professional networks and training

Recommendation 4

Timely and relevant training, and informed support and networking with other experienced professionals, are important tools. Both can help practitioners understand what works for the children and young people, and what good practice looks like. It can also help them manage demands.

The national survey revealed a lack of knowledge and/or training was the biggest barrier faced in teaching literacy to AAC users:



Training was also cited as having the biggest potential impact on practitioners' practice.

With a lack of training available there is also, unsurprisingly, a lack of evidence about which is most effective, so it can be hard to know which to pursue.

How will training help?

Research tells us that practitioners who are trained in reading and writing instruction are more knowledgeable and confident in their teaching abilities and methods for children who use AAC².

It is easy to continue delivering what you know in terms of literacy teaching. By linking practice to the latest evidence on what works, practitioners are more likely to achieve better outcomes for children.

Professional networks can be particularly useful for practitioners working in mainstream schools. They may only work with a handful of children using AAC throughout their whole career and feel quite isolated on their professional journey.

It can be difficult to “know what you don’t know”. Through engaging with professional networks, staff can gain a better understanding of what training is needed.

A professional journey

Developing skills in this specialist area can be a challenging but rewarding journey. Be inquisitive and ask questions – Where are we going? How will we get there? What can we use?

AAC is complex and it evolves and moves fast, particularly in terms of technology. Again this can be challenging but ultimately rewarding when new solutions emerge.

Be sceptical

Be selective and sceptical when choosing a training course. Many of the courses available, whilst made with the best intentions, are produced by organisations that have to make money so have a sales team/strategy behind them. Consider them with a critical eye and discuss any resources they promote with equally critical colleagues, choosing the **most useful and appropriate** resources they suggest rather than what is highly promoted or available.

External training

- Specialised AAC services (or ‘hubs’)
- Local AAC service
- Local special schools providing training days or an outreach service
- AAC suppliers
- Not-for-profit organisations (see Find Out More on p 17 and look at your Local Offer via your Local authority website)

Networks

- Communication Matters’ Google community
- SENIT – DfE hosted forum to support teachers, advisers, and others working within education, to share practical advice about how ICT can be used to support pupils with learning difficulties or disabilities.

Working with parents

It is important that parents are able to understand what is being done to help their child develop literacy skills and why. This is particularly important if a change of approach is being tried. Parents may be able to join external training, or staff may be able to ‘cascade’ what has been learned by inviting parents to watch a lesson or session.

Parents can also get advice from parent networks and are often signposted to training and approaches they think will be helpful. Be open to suggestions, but approach decisions about what is likely to work for a specific child **as a team**, weighing up the child’s strengths and needs with the involvement of parents and professionals.

Case Study

Nicki is a teacher at a local authority maintained day school for 3 to 19 year olds. Her first AAC training course was on a piece of software that can be used to organise word and symbol vocabulary in a book or speech generating device. She started the course with a few children in mind but soon discovered how most of the children in the school would benefit from it. Afterwards, one child was given an eye gaze device, so Nicki could use her new expertise to support that child to develop vocabulary using the high tech device too. A specialist trainer then visited the school and demonstrated how the new methods could be used during a shared reading activity.

Nicki later attended a 5 day residential course which explored the different ways children and young people can learn to read and how these can all be incorporated into daily life. They then cascaded the training. Since then, much of Waverly school’s CPD around AAC and literacy has been in the form of teachers getting together and discussing what has and hasn’t worked for specific children.

Nicki is in touch with other practitioners she has met on her courses via online networks. She is part of a closed Facebook group for those who have attended one of the courses, where practitioners will share positive experiences or difficulties they face in teaching literacy to AAC users. Nicki encourages others use online networks for peer support and advises searching for groups that are focused on particular diagnoses as well as general AAC groups.



Organising symbol vocabulary

Maximise literacy opportunities across the school day and daily life

Recommendation 5

How will it help?

Research shows that literacy development is not age dependent but is based on experiences with print.

Yet for children and young people who use AAC, their experiences of print, from shared reading with an adult to structured lessons in a classroom, are often vastly different in terms of quantity and quality.²

Think about - How could a child or young person with physical difficulties and no speech be supported to share a storybook, and participate in the joint reading of that story?

Remember - All children and young people can learn to use print meaningfully, and it is never too early to begin this exposure process - you can start at birth.

Fostering a love of books and reading

Children and young people will be more motivated if the materials are relevant, interesting and age appropriate. Books to support early literacy skills are often written for very young children, so you may need to invest time in finding resources that match the child or young person's needs and abilities.

Remember print experiences don't have to only come from books, the child or young person may be more engaged in magazines, poems or personalised books about them, their family and friends.

Working with parents

A child or young person's print experiences should not be limited to school lessons. Often children's most memorable and meaningful print experiences come from shared reading with family at home; this is no different for AAC users.

Support parents to understand the importance of regular shared reading experiences and have guidance on appropriate materials and books that can be taken home from school and changed regularly.

Time

Practitioners told us that having more time would help them improve literacy support for pupils who use AAC. Research also reveals that the acquisition of literacy skills can take longer for non verbal than it does than it does for verbal children.

Providing the number of experiences necessary to acquire these skills is likely to be time consuming, and may require a great deal of creativity and 'thinking outside the box', but is an important investment towards achieving literacy goals.

Accommodating other needs

Nonverbal children often have needs in the following areas:

- Communication
- Physical
- Cognitive, including memory
- Sensory

Some of these, for example physical or feeding needs, can mean that the daily routine is complex and variable and as a result of this reading books can fall by the wayside.

It is crucial to champion reading and make sure that it remains part of the child's routine.

Exposure to print

Activities to develop reading and writing skills can take many forms:

- Reading to children
- Reading with children
- Opportunities to read/experience by themselves
- Writing with children
- Opportunities to write/experience writing by themselves
- Phonological activities
- Working with letters and sounds
- Learning/recognising words/print items of personal interest

How can we fit it in?

Opportunities for exposure to print can be pulled out of almost every situation throughout the day, as shown in the table below.

There is still so much to learn about the development of cognitive skills in AAC users, so multiple diverse opportunities to develop these skills are very important.

Situation	Literacy opportunity
Arriving in the classroom	Is my name on my peg?
Answering the register	Can I find my name from a choice of 2...4..8?!
Looking at my timetable or now and next board	Can I see the names of my lessons and activities? Has the team discussed when I should see symbols and when I could see words?
Exploring the school	Are things in the room labelled? The book corner? The toilet? The dinner hall? Can I see the labels?
Events - holidays, mothers/fathers day	Have we made invitations or cards? Could we invent an event so that I can make more? If I am at a pre-or emergent literacy stage I can still take part in choosing typed words to stick in!
Organising the curriculum	Have you used a high quality story as a starting point for activities so that I can get pleasure from books and stories?

Case Study

At Willow Dene, a special school for pupils from 2 to 16 years, the majority of whom are nonverbal, literacy is embedded in school life, culture, routine and curriculum.

Teachers have the freedom to match teaching to the needs of their pupils, and books form a core part of the curriculum, across all subjects. For example, one class is currently focusing on a WOMAD (World of Music, Arts and Dance) topic and have used 'Beautiful Colour Festival Holi' by TA Ramesh as inspiration to make beautiful colour mirrors. Children experience high quality text in the form of fiction, non-fiction and poetry on a daily basis, whatever their level of understanding.

Many physical items, as well as parts of the school and classrooms, are labelled and the children have constant access to written or typed routine vocabulary as well as a range of both personal and group/class timetables. The level of literacy needed is tailored to each child, whether that includes symbols or photographs with words, or words alone. There is also communication support available within the classrooms with vocabulary boards which adults and children both use; these also provide further opportunities for children to be exposed to print.



References, thanks and more information

References

1. Erickson, K. and Koppenhaver, D. (2007) 'Children with Disabilities: Reading and Writing the Four-Blocks Way.' Greensville, North Carolina: Carson-Dellosa Publishing Company.
2. Light, J. 2018. AAC and Literacy intervention: A review of the literature. [ONLINE] Available at: http://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/media/612814/final_version_aac_and_literacy_intervention_literature_review.pdf. [Accessed 27 March 2018].
3. Kirton, McLachlan & Elks (2013) Communication Builders for AAC. Elklan, Newcastle.

What's next for the field

The project that resulted in the key recommendations outlined throughout this resource were supported by research and case study evidence but, while they are important, they are by no means exhaustive. There is much more work to be done in this field.

Developing literacy in AAC users is a complex and neglected area of education and the advisory group which fed in to the project felt strongly that more robust research and consultation, over a longer period of time, is needed to produce the more comprehensive guidance needed for practitioners.

This resource should therefore be taken as a starting point to help practitioners' begin to shape their thinking around the topic. It is intended to be useful in its own right but to also inspire them to find out more.

Find out more

1Voice: www.1voice.info

AAC Scotland: www.aacscotland.org.uk

ACE Centre: acecentre.org.uk

Call Scotland: www.callscotland.org.uk

Candle: www.candleaac.org/literacy

Caroline Musselwhite Literacy Intervention: www.engagingalllearners.ca/ip/conversation-with-caroline-musselwhite

Centre for Literacy and Disability Studies: www.med.unc.edu/ahs/clds/resources

Communication Matters: www.communicationmatters.org.uk

Communication Matters' website also has a Directory of AAC Suppliers. Information and specialist products to promote literacy can be found on some of the suppliers webpages.

Jane Farrall Literacy Site: www.janefarrall.com/literacy

Penn State University Literacy Instruction Site: <http://aacliteracy.psu.edu>

Practical AAC and Literacy site: <http://practicalaac.org/tag/literacy>

Sally Clendon Literacy Site: <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/salclendon>

Therapy Box (Literacy and Educational Resources): www.therapy-box.co.uk/educational-apps

The Communication Trust
www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk



