

Encouraging the Development of Literacy Skills with Children Who Require Alternative/Augmentative Communication (AAC)

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Many parents fondly remember their child's earliest years through the lens of storybooks: from *Goodnight Moon* to *Brown Bear, Brown Bear* to *Lily's Purple Plastic Purse*. But for parents of children who require alternative/augmentative communication, there are often challenges to the book sharing process. Tasks of daily living, such as bathing and feeding, can take up large parts of the day. Positioning equipment like bolsters and adapted strollers make it difficult to cuddle on the couch with a book. And AAC devices themselves can be cumbersome and unwieldy, seemingly impossible to access while also holding a book.

However, literacy skills (the ability to read and write) can open up a world of possibilities for individuals who require AAC. With literacy, these individuals are able to generate communication on their own, by writing out messages rather than relying on pictures or symbols that others have made available to them. Literacy skills allow children to more fully participate in school. With an eye on adulthood, functional literacy skills are required for many activities of daily living (e.g., making grocery lists and keeping track of appointments), and almost all jobs. These skills are becoming increasingly necessary for social connections (email, texting, Internet use). Although there is obviously a tremendous need for AAC users to be functionally literate, many experience difficulties in their development of reading and writing skills.

When comparing home literacy experiences of children under age six who use AAC versus children without disability, Light and Kelford Smith (1993) found that while the amount of printed material in the homes and the frequency of book reading activities were roughly the same, there were some differences between the groups. These differences included:

- Children who used AAC were less likely to initiate book-reading activities, possibly due to motoric challenges that made it difficult to bring a book to a parent or sibling.
- Children who used AAC were less likely to engage in prewriting activities. This may be due to a lack of access to adaptations or computer systems that were required because of physical disabilities.
- Children who used AAC were less likely to ask questions about the story, most certainly due to challenges with expressive language.

There are things that parents and professionals can do to facilitate the reading and writing skills of young children who use AAC. Providing certain experiences and introducing certain skills prior to kindergarten can help level the playing field as the child enters his/her school years. The following ideas may get you started, and additional resources listed at the end of this article will provide more in depth information.

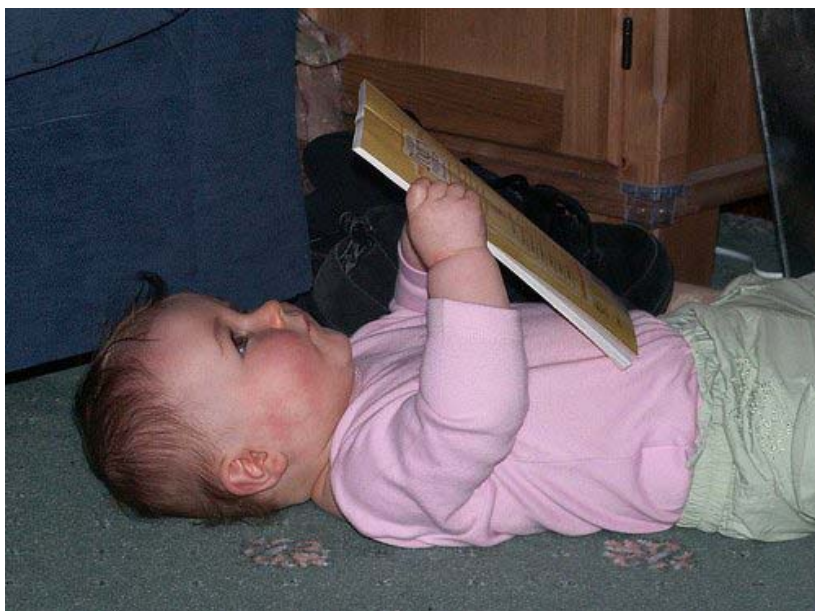
- Be mindful of the challenges the child may have in initiating a book reading activity. Parents, siblings, childcare providers – anyone can bring a book to the child or facilitate their selection of a book!
- Think about positioning: while sitting on an adult's lap may be cozy, it may prevent the adult from seeing the child's facial expressions (so important for pre-verbal kids!), gestures, or signs. Face-to-face positioning allows the child and adult to see each other, and also makes it easier to share attention around the book and/or a speech generating device or picture board.
- Prewriting activities include more than scribbling with crayons! Adaptations are available that allow children with physical disabilities to learn how to control a mouse, type, and produce written documents, (e.g., letters to Grandma, journal pages, printing out interesting pictures). An occupational therapist is an important resource in the identification of these adaptations.
- Make sure that the AAC is available during book-reading activities. That means that picture boards, speech generating devices, and/or PECS books are close at hand and *used* throughout the activity. If a child uses signs, the reading partner should be aware of the signs and be able to understand and respond to them.
- Always, always pair symbols with the written word. For even the youngest AAC users, this pairing starts the association between text and meaning.
- Language instruction is imperative! Frequently, our focus for kids who use AAC is on functional language.

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ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY

However, if our goal is for them to be literate, they need to have an understanding of the more complex vocabulary and grammar (i.e., syntax) that they will encounter in text.

- Find books and stories that are of interest to individual kids. If a child is obsessed with *Thomas the Train*, find books that include Thomas and his friends.
- Make personalized books. Use photos to put together a picture book that tells the story of a family trip, for example. Write or type sentences on the same page as the photo, and tell the story in a logical sequence.
- Provide opportunities for the child to respond to questions about the story. Because he/she may not be able to verbally respond, arrange another way for them to answer. Ideas include pointing to symbols, eye pointing to symbols, making a selection on a speech generating device, or producing a sign.
- Rereading a book several times is a great way for any child to increase their understanding of the links between words, pictures, and meaning.
- Phonological awareness activities are a great way to help young children begin to understand that words are made up of different sounds. Ways to target phonological awareness include:
 - Any kind of rhyming activities—nursery rhymes like *Jack and Jill*, songs that play with sounds like *I Like to Eat Apples and Bananas* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dmW3aBqZtKQ>), or rhyming books like the ones by Dr. Seuss or Sandra Bonyton.
 - Working on sound/symbol awareness, which is the understanding of what sound different letters make. Teachers can be helpful in identifying ways to teach this, and there are great resources out there (including the *Leap Frog Letter Factory* video, which is a really nice tool).
 - Helping kids isolate the initial sound of a word. Explain that we're going to listen for the /t/ sound (use the sound, not the letter name "tee"). Provide and label pictures representing several words, and have the child identify which word starts with the /t/ sound.
 - Working with kids to blend sounds together. For example, pictures of a mop, a cat, and a pin are in front of the child. The adult says the different sounds, "mmm...ahhh...pp," and asks the child what word those sounds make (mop!).



Additional Resources:

<http://aacliteracy.psu.edu/>: Literacy Instruction for Individuals with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Down Syndrome and Other Disabilities

<http://www.songsforteaching.com/phonemicawareness.htm>: Listen to and access lyrics of songs that promote phonological awareness

<http://pbskids.org/superwhy/>: Website for the PBS Kid's show *Super Why*, with a focus on phonological awareness and other early literacy skills

<http://online.sfsu.edu/~nancyr/literacy.html>: Collaborative AAC Services for Children in Inclusive Preschool Settings

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