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Lessons Learned From AAC Camp

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Lessons Learned from AAC Camp

Abstract

Children who benefit from augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) need not only the support of individuals knowledgeable in the technologies themselves but ones who understand the translation of language intervention principles to AAC. It is vital that school based speech-language pathologists (SLPs) possess the knowledge and skills necessary for working with children who use AAC. The purpose of this article is to discuss what we have learned as we teach the new millennium of clinicians and how we can apply these lessons to the work we do with children with the most complex communication needs.

The accessibility of advanced technologies is enabling speech-language pathologists (SLPs) to consider augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) for an expanding number of children. The availability of such resources is shifting how SLPs view AAC. *AAC is no longer viewed solely as an alternative form of communication but as a means to teach communication.* As a result, SLPs working in public schools are considering AAC for increasingly more children. The unique needs of children who benefit from AAC based interventions need not only the support of individuals knowledgeable in the technologies themselves but ones who understand the translation of language intervention principles to AAC. Slowly dissipating is the concept of a single AAC specialist who is responsible for meeting the needs of all AAC users within a school district. What is emerging is that the roles, training, and responsibilities of the school based SLP must encompass knowledge and skills necessary to meet the needs of children who use AAC. Therefore, it is important for university programs to adequately prepare new clinicians for the expanding role of the SLP. The purpose of this article is to discuss what we have learned teaching the new millennium of clinicians and how these lessons can be applied when working with children with complex communication needs.

Chapman University's *All About Communication (AAC)* camp was initially proposed as a means to provide graduate student clinicians valuable hands-on experience working with children who use AAC. Since its launching AAC camp has evolved into an alternative school based service delivery model. Currently in place at four different schools (i.e., two elementary schools and two secondary schools), AAC Camp as a service delivery model is provided to students who present with complex communication needs secondary to diagnoses such as autism, Down syndrome and cerebral palsy. This intensive, immersive, socially based intervention is provided in partial fulfillment of each student's extended school year (ESY). ESY includes those

special education and related services (e.g., speech-language intervention, occupational therapy) that are provided to students with exceptional needs beyond the traditional school year to preclude the disproportionate loss of skills that is likely to occur in the presence of a prolonged break (e.g., summer vacation) (IDEA, 2004). ESY runs for a period of four to five weeks in each of these schools. For two of these weeks, select students, from this point referred to as campers, leave their special education classes to attend “camp.” Campers receive 24 hours of intervention distributed over a 2 week period under the roués of camp. For these two weeks graduate student clinicians assume the role of personal “communication guide” scaffolding opportunities for their camper’s participation (Beukelman & Mirenda, 2005) in various camp themed activities (e.g., camp fire, nature hikes, scavenger hunts, arts and crafts). The socially dynamic environment created by camp enables the communication guide to not only support their camper’s acquisition of linguistic and operational competencies but provides opportunities to facilitate the social and strategic aspects of communication as well. (Light, 1989). Utilizing a child centered approach (Paul & Norbury, 2007), communication guides follow their camper’s lead facilitating their use of core vocabulary for an expanding range of communicative functions.

The progression of an idea to practice can best be described as a dynamic evolutionary process. The current success of AAC camp is the result of continuous adaptations based on the camp’s successes and identified areas needing improvement. A number of lessons have been learned through the active evolution of camp to its current state. This article will illustrate some of those lessons including considerations for setting up a similar program in collaboration with a university or school district. This article will also highlight the role of a systematic approach to assessment and intervention planning to the successful implementation of an AAC based intervention and how language intervention principles can be applied to AAC.

Creating a Similar Program

Setting up a similar model begins with having a *vision*. What is your goal and why is implementing this type of service delivery model important to you, your school, or program? There are so many reasons a school or university may pursue this type of program. The university program may be seeking an opportunity to collaborate with a school district to provide their Communication Sciences and Disorders students authentic experiences working with children in a school setting who benefit from AAC. A school district may want to explore a model of intervention that gives beginning AAC users additional support in the initial stages of being introduced to an AAC system. The reasons are many and will continue to evolve as your program develops.

Once you have identified your preliminary purpose(s) then it is important to connect with a university or school district in your area. *Share* your vision and *inspire* potential stakeholders to the viable benefits of such a service delivery model to all participants (e.g., children, graduate students clinicians/paraprofessionals, classroom teachers, administration). It may be difficult at first for everyone to envision and embrace your idea or the potential benefits of such a program to multiple parties, therefore, it is important to demonstrate the benefits through concrete examples. This can be accomplished by *piloting* the program with a small number of kids and communication guides. Our first summer we enlisted the help of university faculty, school district SLPs and a consultant from the Prentke Romich Company to pilot the program with five campers for five days. Piloting allows you to establish buy in from critical participants and gives you an opportunity to problem solve through some of the logistics. The next step after conducting a pilot camp is to implement the program with a limited number of

graduate students or paraprofessionals and campers. Subsequently you can gradually expand to additional sites and/or increase the number of participants.

Planning for Intervention

Although the ease of accessing a range of communication apps has changed the way we approach AAC for children with complex communication needs, it is this accessibility which can be the roadblock to effective implementation of best practices. We have all experienced instances in which a child who is experiencing difficulty developing a functional means of communication is provided with a communication app external of a systematic assessment of needs and without appropriate instruction. This frequently results in a communication aide programmed with key phrases (e.g., “I want break”) and icons of preferred items. This non-systematic approach to programming hinders the child’s ability to expand their language skills and the purposes for which they communicate. These two goals, expanding language skills and expanding functions of communication, are the crux of why we would consider introducing AAC in the first place.

Vocabulary selection, organization, and representation must transcend from a theoretical perspective which blends what we know with what we know we want to accomplish. Therefore, intervention, particularly as it relates to AAC, must be viewed as an intentional process which begins well before the actual implementation of the intervention itself. We have learned to consider AAC intervention in three phases: the assessment phase, the pre-intervention planning phase, and the actual intervention implementation phase (Schlosser, Koul, & Costello, 2006).

Following an appropriate assessment and related system recommendation, key steps are taken during the pre-intervention planning phase to maximize a child’s opportunity for success during the intervention implementation phase. It is during the pre-intervention planning phase when methodical steps are taken to ensure that the child’s success in using his/her

communication system. Throughout this stage critical decisions regarding vocabulary are made. Specifically, what words or phrases will be included in the child's system, and how will those words/phrases will be represented and organized. The intervention implemented in AAC camp approaches vocabulary selection from a developmental perspective (Banajee, DiCarlo, & Buras-Stricklin, 2003). The focus of intervention is to teach campers to use a core set of vocabulary across activities along with related fringe vocabulary. Fringe vocabulary (e.g., swing, cookie, cup) includes those words and terms which are context or activity specific and reflect the interests and desires of the AAC user (Beukelman & Mirenda, 2013). Core vocabulary on the other hand, (e.g., I, want, go, turn, more) refers to terms that are universal. Core words can be used across environments and activities (Beukelman & Mirenda).

Communication systems are programmed and communication boards are developed so words are individually represented (e.g., "I" and "want" are represented as separate icons as opposed to a single "I want" icon). This gives the camper the opportunity to learn the multi-use functions of individual words. For example, campers learn the icon "turn" can be combined with the "my" icon to request participation (e.g., "my turn") where as it can also be paired with the "you" icon to direct the actions of another person (e.g., "you turn). Consistency of icon placement is another factor considered while setting up a camper's communication aid. Icons with a consistent or fixed location enable campers, including those who experience difficulties with picture discrimination, to access words and create messages relying on motor memory, a process similar to the way we use a keyboard without looking at the letters as we compose written material.

Applying What We Know About Language Intervention to AAC

Another lesson learned from the AAC Camp is the importance of applying evidence based language intervention principles to AAC. Being immersed in the language one is acquiring is a vital aspect of language learning, however for children starting to use AAC there is a disconnect between language models and desired outcomes. Somehow the emergent AAC user is expected to “code switch” from an orally based language system (i.e., language models) to a visually symbolic one (i.e., their AAC system) (Dodd & Gorey, 2013). In addition to incorporating various visual supports (e.g., visual schedules, choice boards, adapted stories) communication guides further enhance their camper’s language exposure opportunities by pairing various language stimulation strategies (e.g., modeling, self-talk, parallel, talk, expansionism) and aided modeling techniques (e.g., aided language stimulation, augmented input). For example, while providing oral language models the communication guide points to corresponding picture symbols on the child’s communication system (Elder & Goosens’, 1994; Goosens, 1989, Goosens’ et al., 1992) (Binger & Light, 2007; Goosens’, 1992; Ronski & Sevcik, 2003). This technique effectively demonstrates communication use in a naturalistic context for the child. Research has demonstrated that aided modeling techniques not only increase use and responsiveness on part of the AAC user (Beck et al., 2009) but also improve their understanding and use of grammatical structures and syntax (Binger, Maguire-Marshall, & Kent-Walsh, 2011; Bruno & Trembath, 2006). Of particular value to many of the children referred to AAC camp is the positive impact of aided modeling techniques on vocabulary comprehension (Dada & Alant, 2009) along with symbol comprehension and production (Binger & Light, 2007; Harris & Reichle, 2004). Table 1 provides examples of various language stimulation techniques and their application to AAC.

Table 1

Language stimulation techniques translated to AAC intervention

Strategy	Definition	Application to AAC
Self-talk	Clinician describes his or her own actions as he or she engages in parallel play with child.	Communication guide pairs self-talk with ALgS to reinforce use of the targeted device.
Parallel talk	Clinician provides a running description of the child's actions.	Running description is provided utilizing ALgS. This strategy provides a model for the child to internalize (Paul & Norbury, 2012).
Modeling	Clinician provides an example of target production.	Communication guide provides an example of a novel, meaningful production using the targeted AAC device.
Expansion	Clinician repeats child's utterance with an additional word or phrase, which creates a more semantically or syntactically complete utterance.	Communication guide repeats child's production and adds symbols to the child's initial message to create a more syntactically complete message.

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Conclusion

It is not uncommon for graduate student clinicians to express skepticism in their camper's ability to demonstrate measurable gains in what they view as a relatively short period of time. Given a traditional pull out service delivery model (e.g., two 30 minute sessions per week) it

would take approximately 24 weeks, over half a school year, for a child to receive the intervention they receive in two weeks of camp. Preliminary research results indicate following the intensive 24 hour intervention conducted over a two week period, campers demonstrate meaningful progress. Campers exhibit gains in the total number of different symbols (TNDS) used and the mean number of symbols per message (MNSM) (Dodd & Hagge, in prep). In addition, campers begin using their communication systems for purposes other than requesting preferred items. The social context of camp represents a more naturalistic environment allowing communication guides to facilitate use of communication for an expanding range of functions. The lessons we have learned from establishing camp can be applied to setting up a similar program or the intervention strategies can be adapted to any classroom environment.

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