

LIGHTHOUSE FREE PARENT GUIDE

AAC 101 for Parents

What I wish I knew before we started —
devices, myths, and working with your SLP.

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Guiding families from diagnosis to thriving

A note before you read on: This guide is educational information only, written by parents for parents — it is not medical or clinical advice. Your child's speech-language pathologist (SLP) is the right person to assess and recommend a specific AAC system.

What AAC Actually Is

AAC stands for Augmentative and Alternative Communication — any method that supports or replaces spoken language. It's a much bigger category than most parents expect.

Unaided AAC uses only the body — gestures, facial expressions, and sign language. **Aided AAC** uses an external tool, from simple picture cards (like PECS) all the way up to tablet-based speech-generating apps and dedicated devices.

AAC is not just for children who are entirely nonspeaking. Many children use AAC alongside speech, especially in moments of stress, fatigue, or when strangers have trouble understanding them.

1

Common Myths — Debunked

What the research actually shows

MYTH: AAC will stop my child from learning to talk.

FACT: Multiple studies over decades have found no evidence that AAC decreases speech production — and several studies report increased vocalizations after starting AAC. (1)

MYTH: My child needs to master certain skills (like picture matching) before they're ready for AAC.

FACT: There is no evidence requiring “prerequisite skills” before introducing AAC. Eligibility should be based on need, not a checklist. (2)

MYTH: AAC is a last resort, only for kids who “never” learn to talk.

FACT: This idea traces back to outdated 1980s thinking. Current research supports introducing AAC as early as possible — waiting can mean lost time for communication development. (3)

2

Devices vs. Apps

Understanding your options

“AAC device” covers a wide range of tools — from low-tech picture boards to dedicated speech-generating devices to apps on an everyday tablet. None is inherently “better”; the right choice depends on your child's motor skills, visual needs, and how they'll use it across settings.

Questions to Help You Compare Options:

- Is this a dedicated device or an app on a shared/general tablet?
- How is vocabulary organized — can it grow with my child over time?
- Is it durable and portable enough for school, therapy, and home?
- Does insurance or the school district cover a dedicated device?
- How steep is the learning curve for me as the parent?

3

Working With Your SLP

Questions for your first AAC conversation

■ **What assessment process do you use to recommend a specific AAC system for my child?**

Why it matters: A good AAC evaluation looks at motor, visual, and cognitive access needs — not a one-size-fits-all pick.

■ **How will vocabulary be selected, and can I have input on words that matter to our family?**

Why it matters: Personally meaningful words (names, favorite foods, routines) build motivation faster than generic vocabulary.

■ **How often will the device/app need updating as my child's skills grow?**

Why it matters: AAC systems should evolve — a system that never changes can become a ceiling instead of a bridge.

■ **Can you train me and other caregivers on how to model AAC use at home?**

Why it matters: Modeling AAC yourself (not just prompting your child to use it) is one of the most effective strategies.

4

Keeping Vocabulary Consistent

Across home, therapy, and school

One of the biggest factors in successful AAC use is consistency. If your child's device says different things, or is organized differently, at home versus school versus therapy, progress slows dramatically.

Tips for Consistency:

- Ask for a shared vocabulary list from your SLP, ABA team, and teacher
- Bring the SAME device/app to every setting whenever possible
- Model AAC use yourself throughout the day, not just during “practice” time
- Update everyone on the team when new words are added
- Celebrate any use of the device — even imperfect attempts are communication

*“AAC is not giving up on speech.
It's giving your child a voice while speech has room to grow —
and sometimes, it's the very thing that helps speech arrive.”*

— With love, from parents who've been there ■

Sources & Further Reading

This guide reflects current research consensus on AAC and autism. It does not replace an individualized evaluation by a speech-language pathologist.

1. Research on AAC and speech development: reviews from the Association for Science in Autism Treatment (ASAT) and peer-reviewed studies (e.g., White et al., 2021; Millar, Light & Schlosser, 2006) finding no evidence that AAC decreases speech production, with several studies reporting increased vocalization.
2. Prerequisite skills myth: The National Joint Committee for the Communication Needs of Persons with Severe Disabilities states eligibility for AAC should be based on individual need, not a prerequisite skills checklist.
3. AAC as early intervention: Systematic reviews (e.g., PMC systematic review on Naturalistic Developmental Behavioral Interventions and Aided AAC, 2023–2024) support introducing AAC early, rather than waiting to see if speech develops first.

This guide is free. Share it with any family who needs it.