

OUT AND ABOUT: AAC in the Community!

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WHY Start A Community Group?

Circles of Communication Partners. Sarah Blackstone (Blackstone & Berg, 2003) has developed this concept of Circles of Communication Partners, based on the work of Marsh Forest and Judith Snow, who described Circles of Friends (1989).

First Circle: The person's life-long communication partners;

Second Circle: Close friends/relatives;

Third Circle: Acquaintances;

Fourth Circle: Paid workers;

Fifth Circle: Unfamiliar partners.

Of the five communication circles, communicating with Unfamiliar Partners (Circle 5) seems to be especially challenging . . . and daunting . . . for many AAC users. This is true because unfamiliar partners have no shared knowledge to draw on, have no idea about how communication devices function, often do not know the 'rules' of communicating with AAC users (such as pausing and speaking directly to the users, pausing), and do not have any strategies to try when communication breakdowns occur. We decided that a monthly community outing for AAC users, with very specific AAC goals, would support our students in using their devices in general, and with unfamiliar listeners in particular.

As we engaged in the monthly meetings, we found support for all five circles:

- *First Circle:* parents and siblings became more familiar with devices, learned strategies to better scaffold communication, and learned how to be a facilitator as well as a communication partner
- *Second Circle:* the initial setup addressed close friends, as the girls in the group ('Fox Girls') were friends through AAC camp and other meetings.
- *Third Circle:* AAC users learned strategies for communicating with acquaintances, including other AAC users
- *Fourth Circle:* paid workers (therapists, mentors, respite workers) often attend the meetings, and learned how to be better partners and facilitators
- *Fifth Circle:* as indicated, communicating with unfamiliar partners was a major goal of the group. AAC users needed to understand how to alter communication to ensure success with unfamiliar listeners.

Support! A major goal of the groups has been to provide support to both AAC users and family members. The users realize that there are other students 'just like me' and have (or become) role models. Families provide a support network for each other.

Blackstone, S. & Berg, M. (2003). *Social Networks*. Augmentative Communication, Inc., 1 Surf Way, # 237, Monterey, CA 93950

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WHO Might Come to Meetings

This users group evolved from a small, homogeneous group of teenaged girls to a larger, heterogeneous group of AAC users and their family members and mentors.

Phase 1: The Fox Girls

Initially, four young teenage girls comprised the group. Three of the girls were at our first AAC camp. They had such a delightful time together, and were so clearly bonded that we decided to continue the gatherings when we returned to The City. We then added the fourth student. This group was quite homogeneous, with all four being teen-aged girls, all ambulatory, and all using the same communication device and language system.

Phase 2: Fox Girls and Friends!

As other families heard about our group, we got repeated requests to join the group. We began offering occasional large group meetings, and the group took off in terms of membership. The range in age is now 4 - 28, with a range of communication devices and language systems in use. Students use various access methods, from direct selection to scanning via mouth switch to two switch scanning. Approximately half of the group uses a wheelchair for mobility.

Partners and Mentors

Each student that attends the group is required to bring an adult family member or mentor. The mentor is often a respite worker or parapro. Siblings often attend the group, adding richness and supporting follow-through at home.

Factors to Consider

Homogeneous Grouping: Having a group of individuals who are the similar in age, interests, and language systems used is simple in terms of planning, and can be fun for the AAC users, contributing to development of friendships (Circle 2 in the Circle of Communication Partners, Blackstone, 2002).

Homogeneous Grouping: Developing a group with a variety of ages, interests, communication devices, etc. is more challenging but more enriching. Students who are older or more accomplished AAC users can be great models and mentors for younger or beginning AAC users. The older / more accomplished AAC users also learn more about their devices from being placed in the role of teacher.

WHAT's Up? Activities & Goals

Activities: Sample activities have included: bowling / painting on pottery/ ice cream parlor / Diamondback game / scrapbooking / spaghetti house.

Janice Light (1989, 1998) defines communicative competence as ". . . the ability to communicate functionally in the naturally environment and to adequately meet daily communication needs." She further describes four sets of skills that AAC users must have to be competent communicators. We tried to incorporate these areas into our monthly AAC Group meetings:

- **Linguistic Skills** include receptive and expressive skills in the native language spoken by the family and broader social community. This includes skills in the 'linguistic' code of the AAC system. Examples include teaching vocabulary, icon sequences, navigating dictionaries, past tense.

Sample Out & About Activities:

- Practicing on vocabulary from the top 330 words list;
- Using adjectives to describe tastes of various ice creams
- Playing 'Bingo' with words useful in crafts activity

- **Operational Skills** refer to the technical skills required to use the AAC system(s) accurately, efficiently, and appropriately. Examples include: using a head pointer to indicate items on a communication board and using row-column scanning with a single switch.

Sample Out & About Activities:

- Storing messages in Notebooks (PathFinder)
- Using a switch to deliver parts of a social script
- Moving in and out of notebooks to deliver short, un-planned messages
- Programming requests under one button as needed (ex: 'Criss-cross, applesauce' during storytelling to young children; family programming 'I'd like chocolate ice cream please')

- **Social Skills** refer to knowledge, judgment, and skills in the social rules of interaction. Included are skills to initiate, maintain, develop, and terminate interactions; skills to develop positive relationships and interactions with others; and skills to express a full range of communicative functions.

Sample Out & About Activities

- Enhance turntaking through interviews
- Practice elements of conversation: greeting / topic starter / maintainer / closing
- Learn/ practice responses to 'non-obligatory turns' (ex: awesome /yikes /really)

- **Strategic Skills** refer to compensatory strategies that may be utilized by individuals who use AAC to overcome functional limitations that restrict their effectiveness as communicators. An example is providing new partners with information about how to communicate with them.

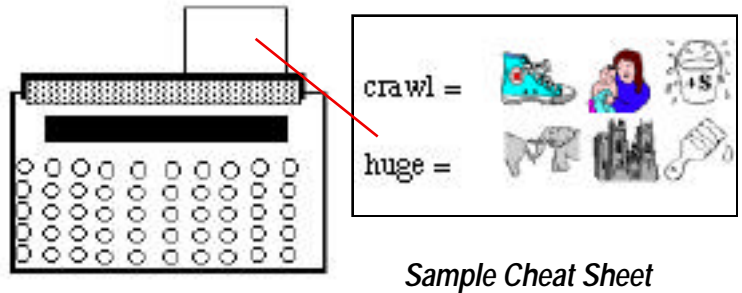
Sample Out & About Activities:

- Pre-planning interview questions in a notebook (PathFinder)
- Entering conversation into message window, then speaking 1 sentence at a time
- Giving an idea, and having facil. help create clear sentence for unfam. partners

HOW to Scaffold AAC Success

We have worked hard to figure out strategies to help AAC users be more successful. Here are a few ideas that seem to help!

Cheat Sheets: For some students, it is helpful to plan a vocabulary set for the activity and prepare a cheat sheet (ex: icon sequences). The example how symbols might be represented on a cheat sheet, and how it might be attached to a device.



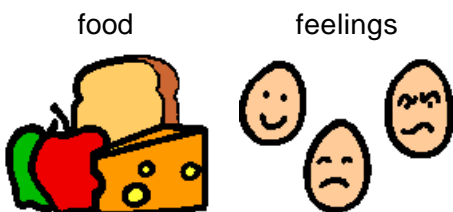
Sample Cheat Sheet



Use of Props: Concrete props can be helpful for beginning communicators.

- photos of summer vacation to stimulate talk about activities and people
- objects for 'Show & Tell'

Talking for Points! We initially wondered if it was appropriate to have students work for points and prizes. The results seem to support that approach. Goals vary for students depending on their age and facility with the language in their communication device. For example, a student who is a generative communicator might earn 1 point per word (with extra points for correct word endings, such as plurals or verb tenses). Prizes included: items from \$ store, handmade jewelry, Diamondback tickets, BlockBuster gift certificates.



Advance Notice of Goals: Participants are sent notice of targets for the next week, so they can explore devices to find appropriate vocabulary. Ex: one 'getting to know you' activity had generative communicators planning interviews with responses from three categories: colors / feelings / foods. Those three categories were sent to beginning communicators to practice.

Facilitator / Partner Roles Training: Parents, teachers, therapists, siblings, and mentors are shown how to talk with students when in the role of partner (ex: ask open-ended questions, pause, maintain eye contact), and facilitator (be subtle; don't over-prompt; don't have eye contact with the AAC user's partner, etc.) See: www.aacintervention.com / Tip of the Month for a partner / facilitator handout.