

AAC Models & Mentors

Providing Powerful Role Models

WHAT? AAC mentors are individuals who use AAC and can provide role models for others who are learning to use AAC systems. Gilmore and Sharples explain that “A mentor may share with a mentee information about his or her own career path, as well as provide guidance, motivation, emotional support, and **role** modeling (ISAAC, 2021). For this tip, I am including less formal versions of AAC mentors. For this purpose, a mentor is anyone who can provide a role model of successful communication, including use of AAC.

WHY DEVELOP A MENTOR PROGRAM? This is important because:

- Individuals who are learning AAC systems need to see what it looks like;
- Family members need to have a ‘vision’ of what AAC use can mean – we have heard family members report that mentors give them hope and a reason to model more;
- Being a mentor can be highly motivating. We have seen future mentors honing their skills in order to be successful mentors, not to mention the power of feeling like you make a difference.

I learned the power of having a mentor nearly 35 years ago when Rick Creech (author, [Reflections From a Unicorn](#) and AAC consultant at PATTAN) spoke at a parents group at the Irene Wortham Center where I was a speech-language pathologist working with children and adults who use AAC. From that single two-hour experience, the following results were seen.

- One young man talked to Rick (using his AAC device, and with the help of his tutor) to develop a plan to convince his parents not to leave his AAC device in the car – the plan worked;
- Several families gained motivation to make sure that AAC systems were available all day long, in multiple situations;
- One six-year-old was mesmerized. She had previously scorned using a headstick, although it was the ideal access method for her (remember, this was before successful light pointing / eyegaze systems!) The following morning, she came into the room and looked repeatedly at the headstick hanging on the wall, squealing until a para brought it to her. She joined the ‘headstick club’ and was able to move from an 8-location device to a 64-location device, which allowed her language skills to grow.

WHO IS THIS FOR? Ideally, mentors will be skilled at using their AAC systems, as described by Gilmore and Sharples. Many of the mentors that work with me are skilled and provide a model that far surpasses the current level of their mentees. Their mentees benefit greatly from their models and their experiences. However, we have found that mentors do not need to be expert at using their AAC systems. They need to be motivated communicators, who are willing and eager to interact with others. For beginners, an individual who is initiating their system and trying to communicate can be a role model that seems ‘accessible.’ For example, at one of our community

outings for people who use AAC, a student used her power chair to roll up to a new student (also in a wheelchair) and used her switches to say HI and I'M SALLIE. Sallie smiled and looked at the new member and vocalized with delight. The Mom of the new member (who was not yet using his AAC device) said, 'This is Jorge.' Sallie vocalized again and said LIKE. Both Jorge and his Mom were entranced. Jorge's Mom later told us that this was the first time he really 'got' what his device was for.

HOW TO MAKE IT HAPPEN:

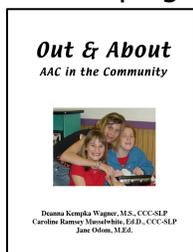
Formal Program. Consider starting a formal mentor / mentee program, such as the one developed by ATTherapy services in the UK, developed by Gregor Gilmore and Andrea Sharples. This charity-funded project is both extensive and impressive. Mentors are matched to mentees, and supported by a speech-language therapist initially. They plan and work together in homes, in the community, through education and training sessions, and through remote sessions. They also engage in fun groups such as a summer group, Christmas group, and Easter group. The ATTherapy Mentor program has four levels of mentors, from Mentor Trainee, to Mentor to Specialist Mentor and finally Highly Mentor. Each level is described based on a range of learning areas, including work-related tasks, paperwork, skills and abilities, etc. For more information about this project, visit their website: <https://attherapy.co.uk/at-mentors/> and/or subscribe to their youtube channel: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCeM-LB_B49RbgVYKogxQq2g/featured.



Informal Models and Mentors Project. Perhaps starting an intensive mentor program seems overwhelming with regard to time or finances. It is still possible to develop a program that supports individuals in being AAC models, and helps them begin the journey to mentorship. The [AAC Mentors tip](#) shown on the right is from 2013. The three priorities shared in that tip are still valid.



- **Role Model.** Each of the three young women shown in the 2013 tip has gone on to be a role model in various ways, from working and presenting in the field to developing a website to creating and sharing artwork.



- **Been There and Can Share Experiences.** As the lived experience has expanded, our original models continue to share their experiences, privately and publicly. Many other AAC Models have emerged from our groups, including our Out and About (download the free [Out and About book](#)) and Literacy Groups. Many of the individuals who were once mentees are now providing leadership roles in these groups.

- **Direct Instruction.** Individuals who use AAC can provide authentic, meaningful instruction through modeling, [AAC games](#), etc. We have developed a range of games to support learning the language on AAC devices. Ideally, these games are run by individuals who use AAC.



Gilmore, G. and Sharples, A. (2021). The Mentor Journey. *ISAAC Online Conference*.