Communication Journeys for Autistic Individuals

https://www.tennesseetalks.org/

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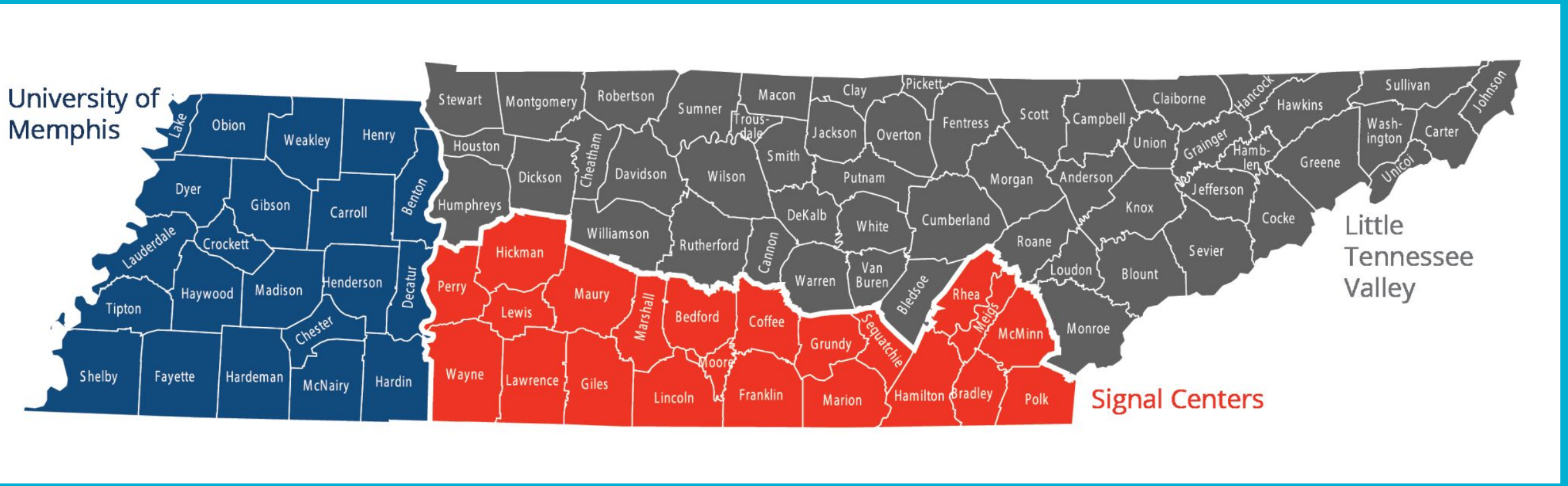
We are employed through the TN Talks project but have no other financial or non-financial relationships to disclose.

Tennessee Talks

- Grant funded project by the TN Department of Education
- TN-DOE and regional centers are working together to positively impact the lives of students with complex communication needs
- The overarching goal of the project is to:
  - Connect students with appropriate AT-AAC systems for improved life outcomes
  - Provide education and support and build informed AAC school teams

http://tennesseetalks.org/


University of Memphis
Lake
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Hardeman
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Robertson
Sumner
Macon
Clay
Pickett
Houston
Dickson
Cheatham
Davidson
Wilson
Trous-dale
Jackson
Overton
Fentress
Scott
Campbell
Claiborne
Hancock
Hawkins
Sullivan
Johnson
Humphreys
Smith
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Roane
Knox
Sevier
Loudon
Blount
Rhea
Meigs
McMinn
Monroe
Wayne
Lawrence
Giles
Lincoln
Moore
Franklin
Grundy
Sequatchie
Marion
Hamilton
Bradley
Polk
Little Tennessee Valley
Signal Centers

THE GOAL IS SNUG
SPONTANEOUS NOVEL UTTERANCE GENERATION
RACHAEL LANGLEY
AAC SPECIALIST

Autonomous Communication

"Being able to say what I want to say,
to whoever I want to say it to,
whenever I want to say it,
however I choose to say it."

-Gayle Porter (Speech language pathologist, Developer of PODD)

Types of Communication Journeys

Analytic Language Acquisition Journey
Progression from infancy to adulthood

Infants

Demonstrate understanding of single commonly used words and first words around 1st birthday.

We must be receptive to their inability to verbally express their needs

Toddlers to Pre-K

They begin to understand oral language and produce utterances progressing from single words to phrases and short sentences.

https://www.asha.org/public/speech/development/chart/

Analytic Language Acquisition Journey

Young Children

Once they have begun to grasp and use oral language, they are able to easily indicate their needs and feelings. They use more complex words, progressing to full sentences.

Older Children –Adults

Thoughts become more detailed, and language reflects that growing knowledge base. Exposure to language results in vocabulary expansion and more complex communication.

Another Journey to Language

- **Gestalt language acquisition**

  - It is a different way of acquiring and processing language
  - The focus is on intonation and social interaction structure of language.
  - Occurs in children with and without disabilities
  - Autistic individuals are often gestalt processors

What is Gestalt Language?

- Basic units of language may be phrases and/or complete sentences
- A gestalt carries a single meaning so a phrase/sentence = 1 meaning
- Language is relatively inflexible in early stages
- Echolalia is common- immediate or delayed echoes are sometimes referred to as gestalts

Echolalia is a good sign!

- Researchers have found that “at least 85% of the children with autism who acquire speech” reported echolalia usage (Rydell and Prizant, 1995).

- Echolalia has many functions of communication!

- Label	- Protesting
-Provide information	- Directing
-Call	- Taking conversational turns
-Affirm	- Request

What does language development look like for gestalt learners?

- First words may be dismissed as babbling since gestalt processors usually talk in larger units (and articulators are not able to “keep up”)

- It is necessary to break down the phrases and sentences and teach individual words

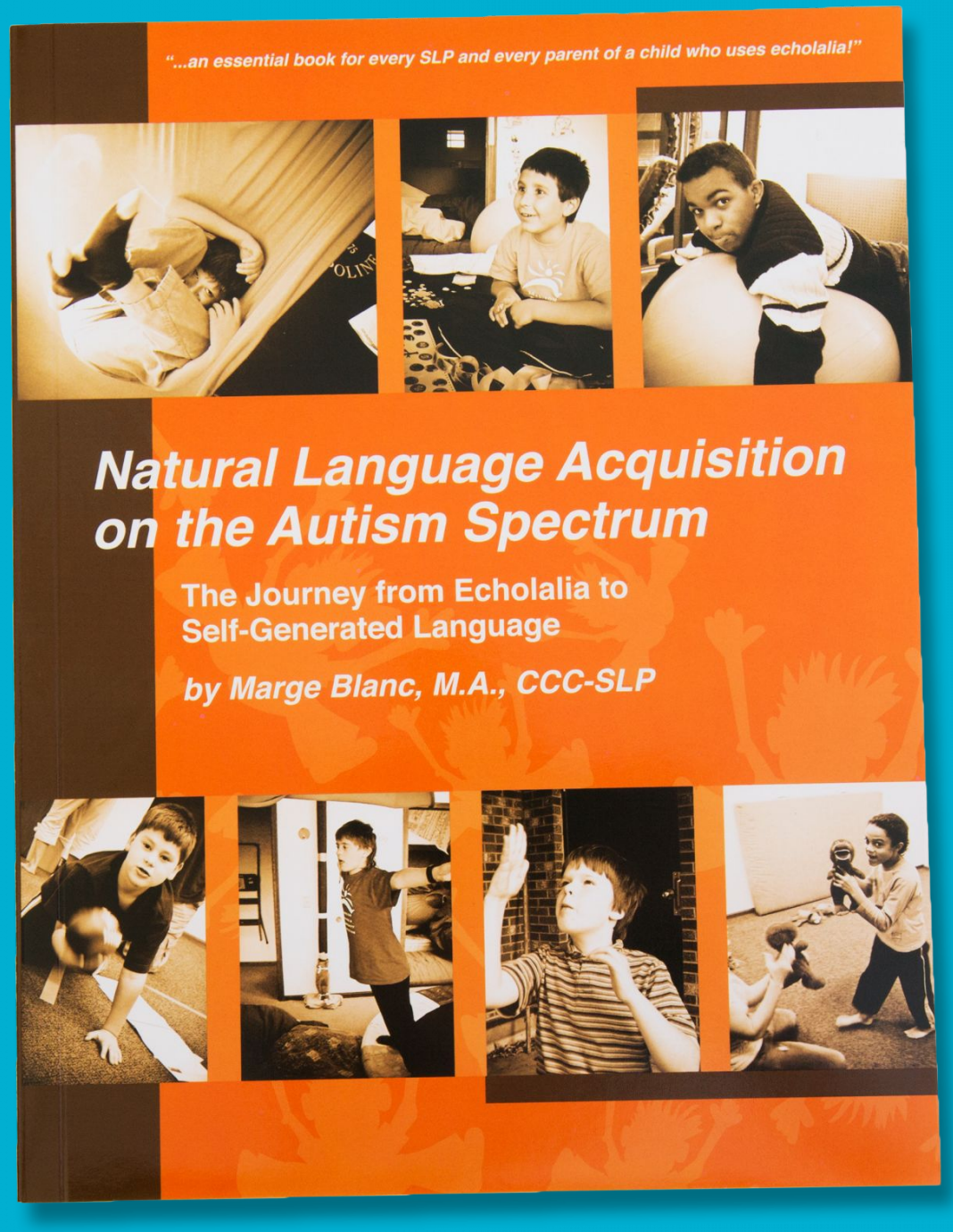
Gestalt Language Journey

Stage	Language Examples	
1: Communicative use of language ***gestalts***	"Let's get out of here!"	"Want some more?"
2: *Mitigation* into: (a) chunks and (b) recombining	(a) "Let's get + out of here!" "Want + some more?"	(b) "Let's get some more!" "Want out of here?"
3: *Isolation* of single words and generation of two-word phrases	"Get...more."	"Want...out?"
4: *Generation* of more complex sentences	"I got more."	"I wanna go out."

Further Resources

https://www.asha.org/practice-portal/clinical-topics/autism/echolalia-and-its-role-in-gestalt-language-acquisition/

https://www.hanen.org/SiteAssets/Articles---Printer-Friendly/Research-in-your-Daily-Work/The-Meaning-Behind-the-Message_Helping-Children-wh.aspx



What about AAC?

What's that all about?

How does it fit into the communication journey?

Definition of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)

Augmentative: supplemental support for speech

Alternative: replacement options in the absence of speech

Communication: the ability to share our thoughts, ideas, and information with others

Communication can take many forms: speech, text, gestures or facial expressions, touch, sign language, symbols, pictures, speech-generating devices, etc.

GoTalk 9+
Hello
Later

bathroom
bathroom
outside
read

no
yes

What's up?
Let's talk!

AAC is the last resort

AAC and Communication Development

- AAC can support either an analytic journey or a gestalt journey. More research has been done with analytic learners than gestalt learners but the research base is growing.

- Just because they are not using vocalizations does not negate the communication intent! Accept all forms of communication!

- Reduce frustration due to lack of communication by giving another means for communication even if oral speech is developing.

- A child does not have to be “non-verbal” to benefit from an AAC device.

Multimodal Communicators

Multimodal Communicator- having multiple methods to communicate your wants, needs, and ideas.

We all use multiple modes of communication throughout the day!

AAC users are multimodal communicators like any person who communicates verbally.

If an attempt to communicate is made, it should be honored.

Communicators may use

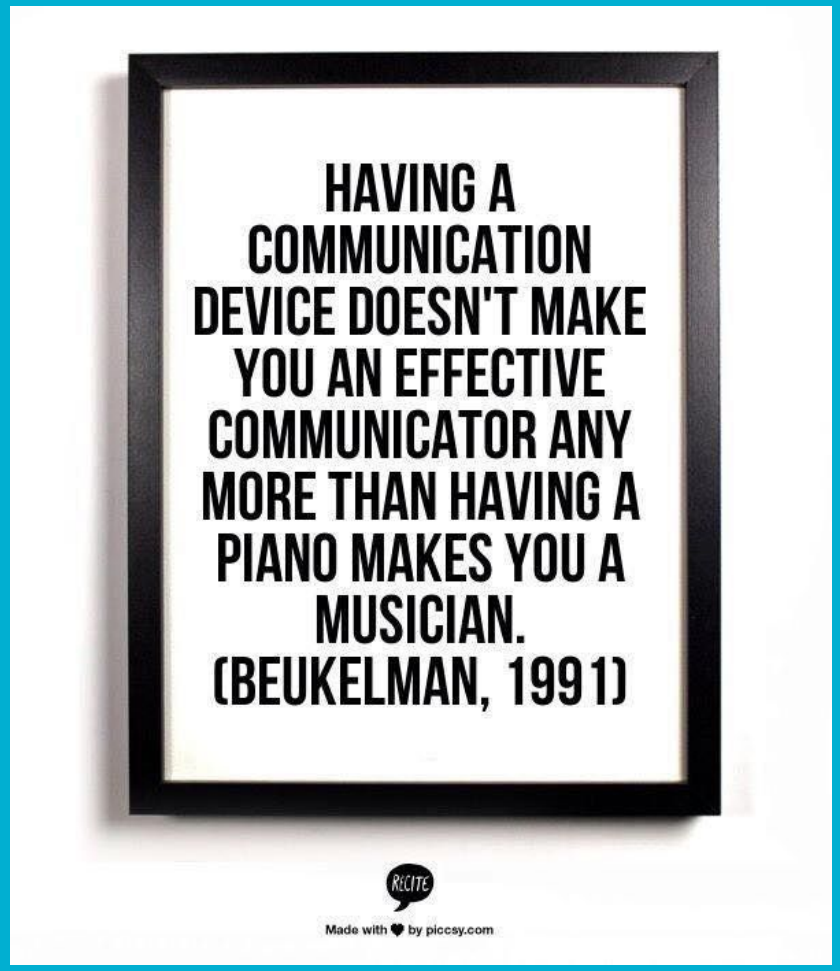
- Vocalizations
- Environmental noises
- Word approximations
- Gestures
- Written word
- AAC devices
- Pointing to real objects in the environment or pictures

How do we teach language using AAC?

- AAC learners learn to communicate just like a typical language learner
  - Listening and watching others
  - Require a lot of input before we can expect them to be proficient AAC users
- A communication partner uses an AAC system by pointing to symbols as they speak orally, this is called Modeling or Aided Language Input.

Basics of Modeling

- It is not a one-time event. It can take days, weeks, months, and even years for some individuals to learn the symbol to word correspondence.
- Model words during real life situations, helps an AAC user learn the meaning of the vocabulary
- Modeling teaches the child where words are in the AAC system and how to combine symbols to form messages.



Core vs. Fringe Vocabulary

Core Vocabulary

- The words we use most in conversation (approx. 75-80% of words used)
- Examples: I, you, go, not like, do, see, different
- Lots of overlap with early sight words when teaching literacy
- Often hard to define without context
- Used across topics, activities, places, etc.
- Can be combined to say a lot of different things
- Most powerful when combined with fringe vocabulary

Fringe Vocabulary

- Words we use less often (approx. 20-25% of words used)
- Examples: pizza, train, elephant, sink, medicine
- Rich in meaning and easily understood out of context
- Includes many nouns (i.e., person, place, thing)
- Often topic specific
- May vary person to person based on interest, preferences, setting
- Most powerful when combined with core vocabulary

THE AAC COACH

Everybody Needs Both!

@the.aac.coach

Core Words

Speak | Clear | Delete | Share

Back | what | I | is | want | not | All Word Lists

Core Words | who | you | can | like | more | Personal

QuickFires | where | it | do | go | a | Little Words

Topics | when | he | have | stop | and | Description

Keyboard | why | she | help | put | the | Punctuation

Dashboard | Questions | People | will | Actions | that | Word Forms

Core and Fringe Words

Both Core and Fringe vocabulary are important.

Core words should be a part of the focus when first introducing AAC, as core words can be used to form a sentence.

Function	Core Word Examples
Sharing Opinions/ News	Like, not like, that good, different, I go, I do, she help, good
Commenting	Look, see it, same, different
Starting a conversation	I like, Who, Where she
Requesting	Make more, get that, in here
Asking Questions	Want some? Why? Where? Can I?
Protesting	Stop, Not help

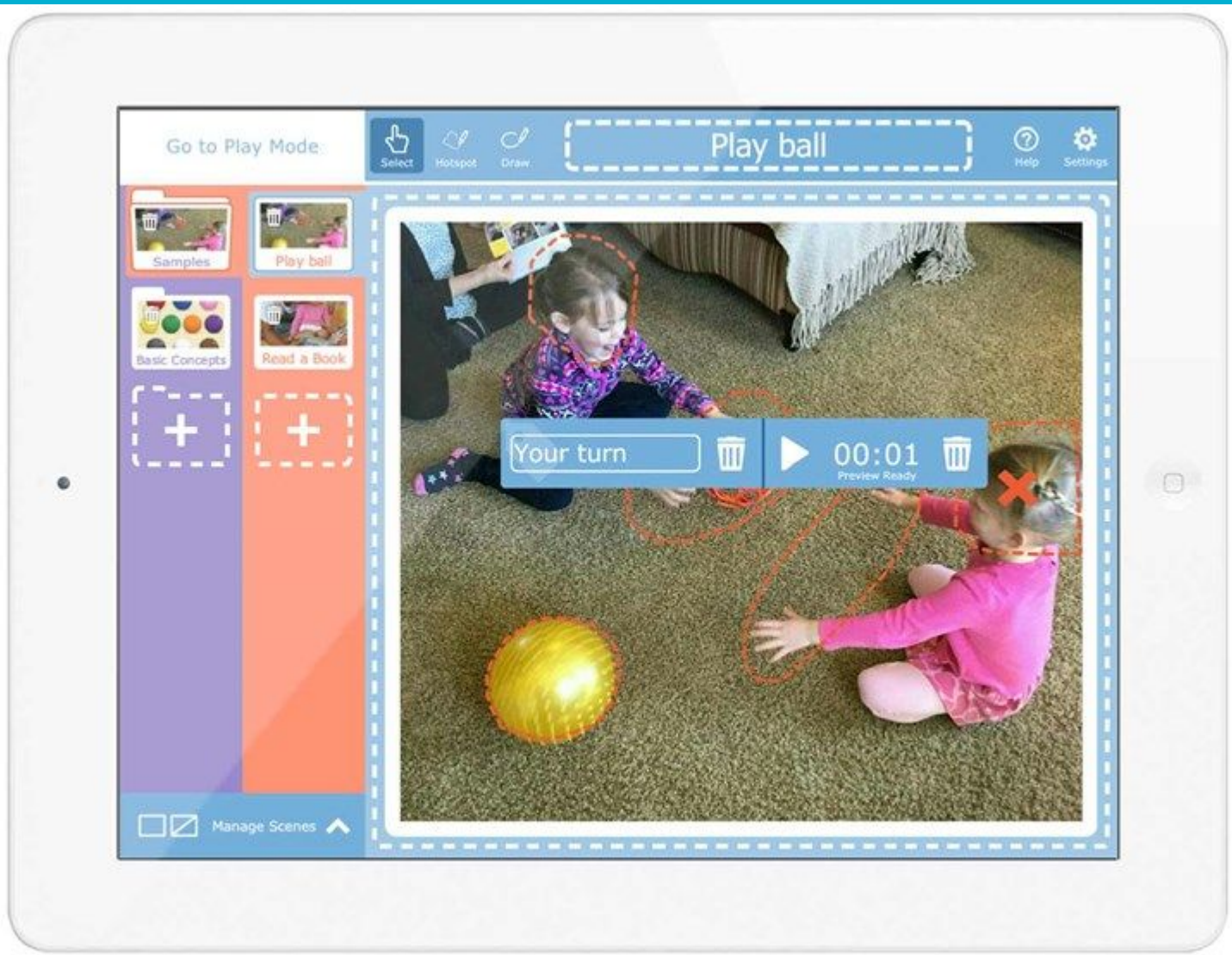
BY 18 MONTHS
babies have heard
4,380 HOURS
OF SPOKEN LANGUAGE
and we don't expect them
to be fluent speakers
YET
If AAC learners only see symbols modeled for
communication twice weekly for 20-30 minutes, it will take
84 YEARS
for them to have the same exposure to aided language
as an 18 month old has to spoken language.
photo by Rachael Langley - AAC Specialist

AAC and the Gestalt Language Journey

- This is a current area of study to identify the best practices in AAC for this type of language learner.

- HOWEVER, practicing clinicians state that they have found the following to be good practice for these learners.

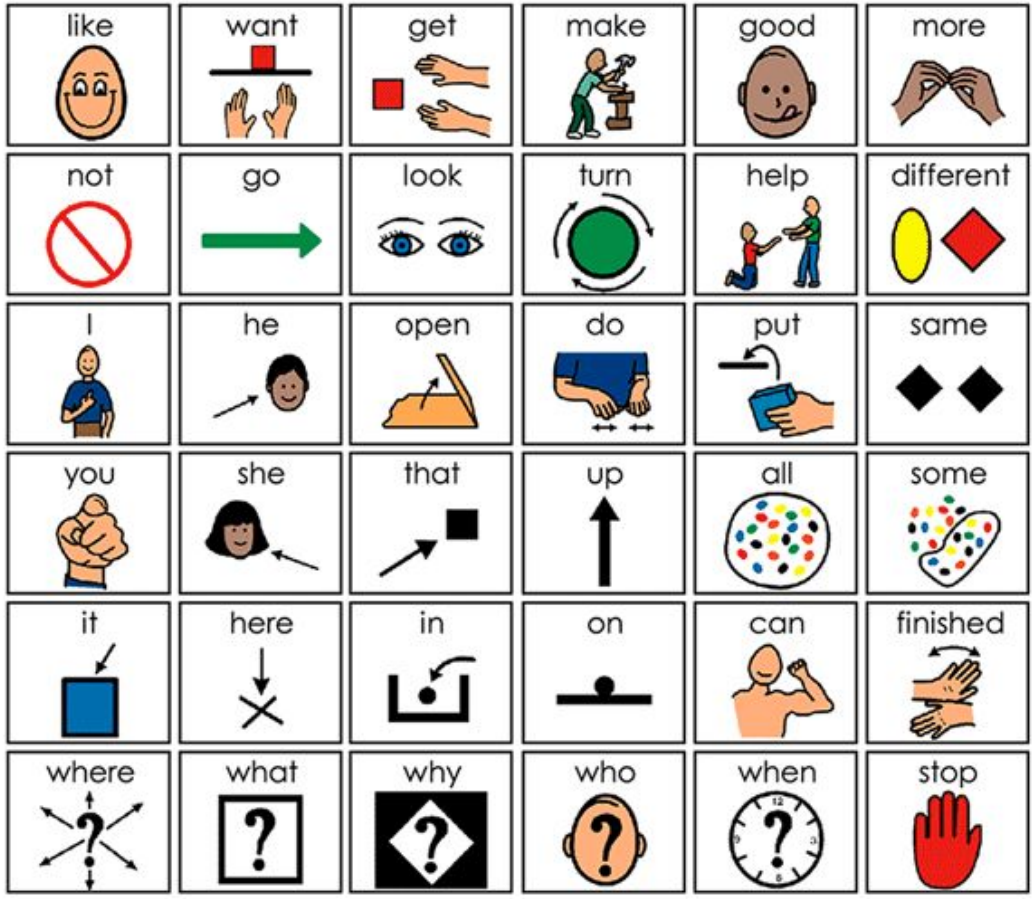
Visual Scene Display



I am ready to go

			Chat	Actions	Describe	Help	and it the words up		
I	he	want	do	in	on	more	People	Food	
you	she	like	go	out	off	here	Places	Clothes	
that	it	is	are	with	away	again	School	Time	
what	mine	make	get	for for	different	very very			
where	who	stop STOP	can	to	now	not			

Home



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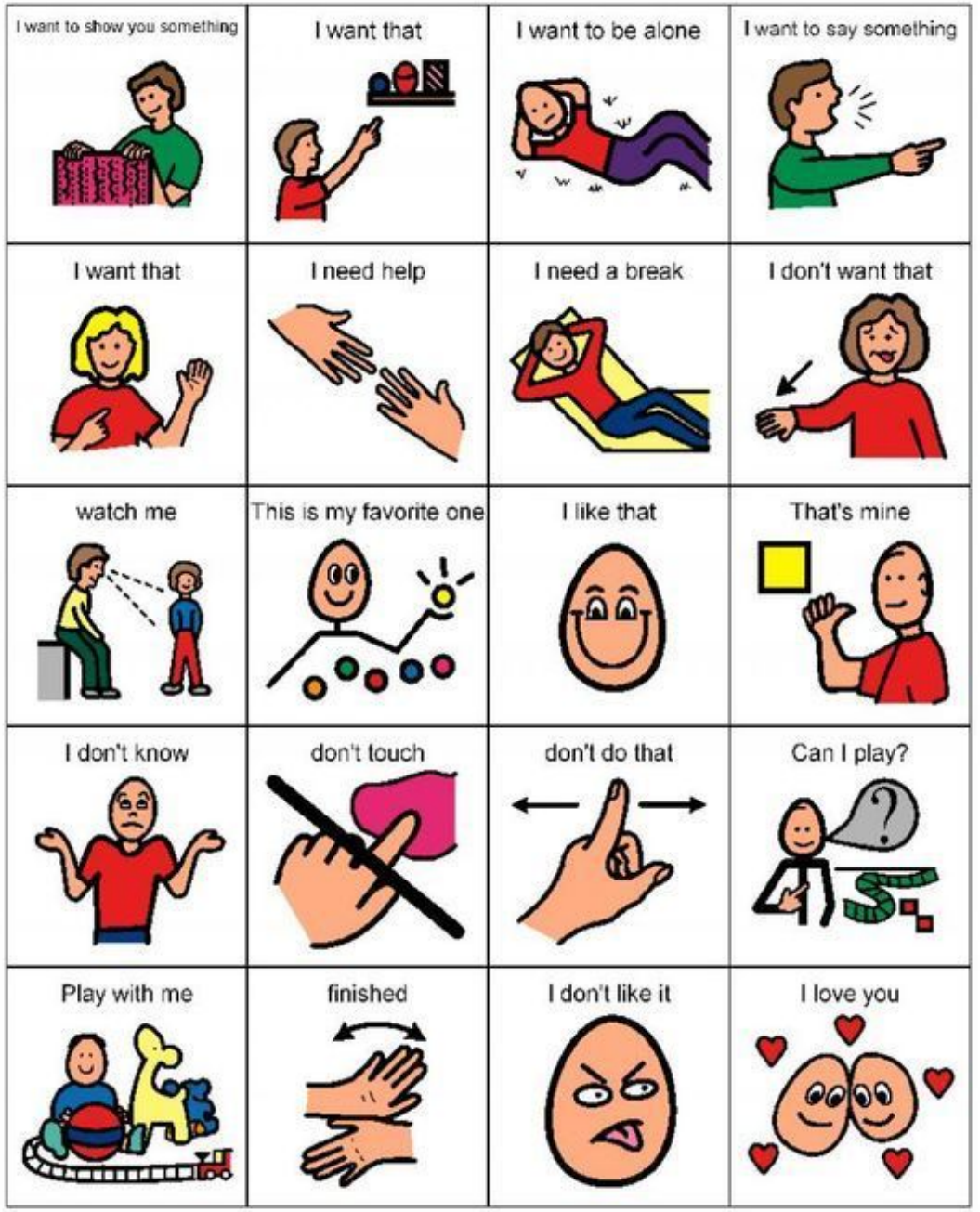
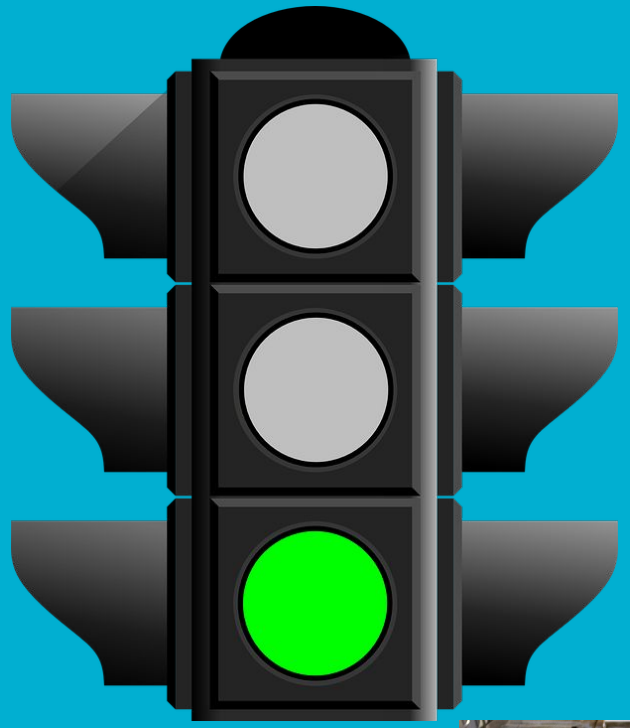
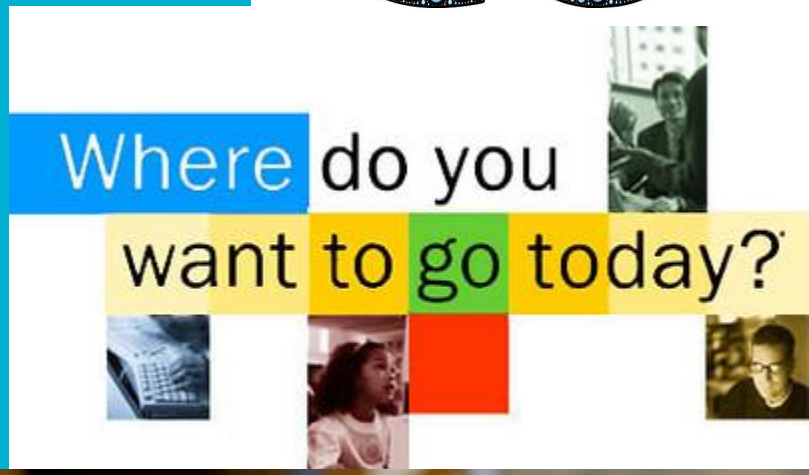


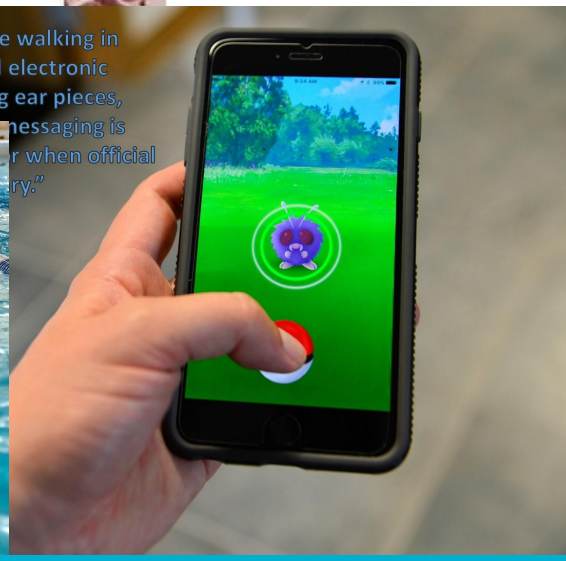
Useful Pragmatics Picture Cards

PDF created with pdfFactory trial version www.pdffactory.com

GO used in a variety of contexts





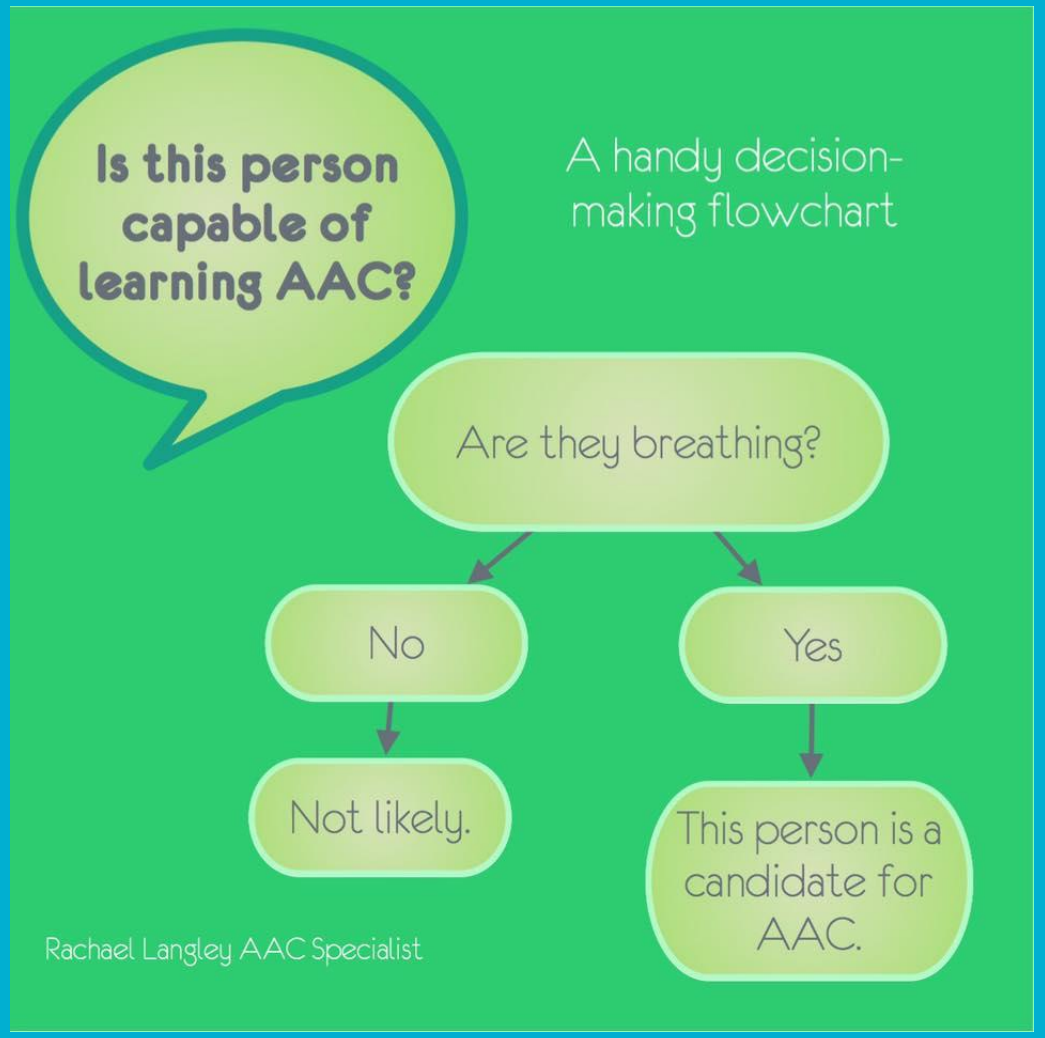


Augmentative and Alternative Communication Myth Busting

- We are never too young or too old to learn to communicate
- There is no such thing as too “low functioning” or too “behavioral”
- Physical limitations do not impede access
- We do not always need to “start small and work our way up”
- Use of AAC does not prevent development of verbal speech (studies show the opposite!)

Presume potential!

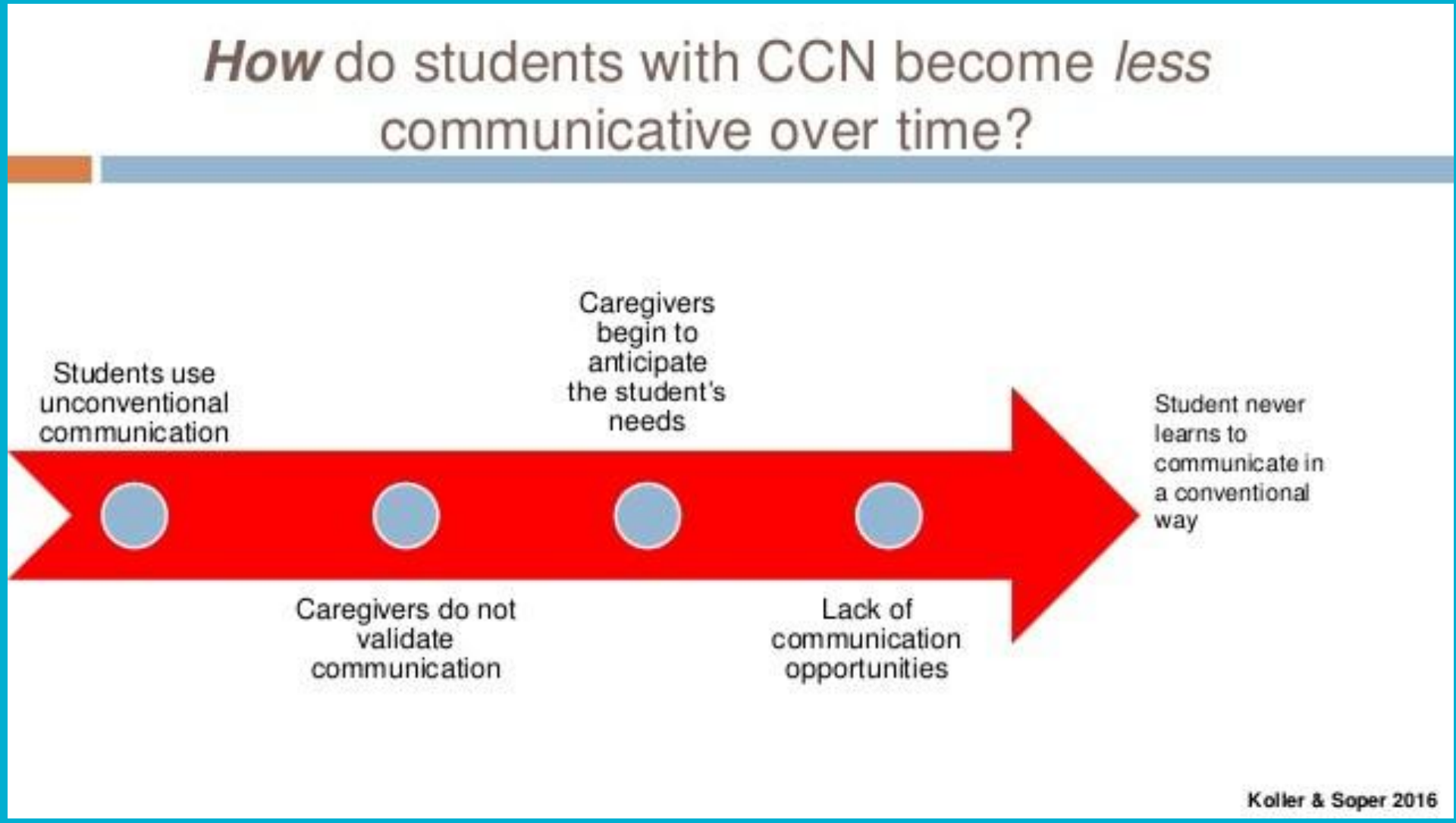
Moving along the road!
Tips and Tricks



"We have discovered increasingly that communication has only one prerequisite; it has nothing to do with mental age, chronological age, prerequisite skills, mathematical formulae or any of the other models that have been developed to decide who is an AAC candidate and who is not. Breathing is the only prerequisite that is relevant to communication. Breathing equals life, and life equals communication. It is that simple."

- Mirenda, 1993

No one is ever too old to learn language!



Self Talk

Say aloud what you are doing to model your thinking process and language

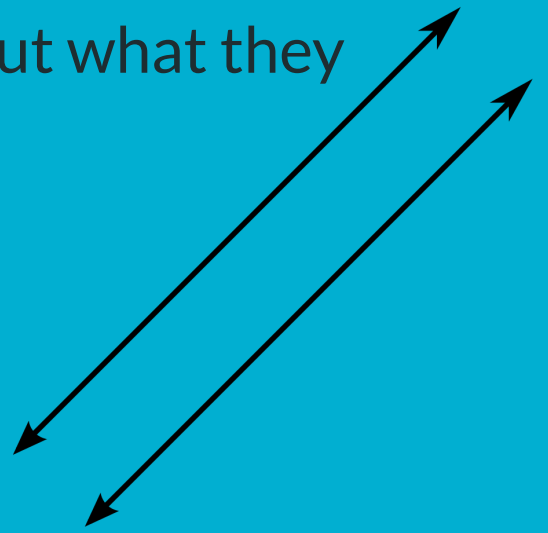
Examples:

- “I need to cut vegetables for dinner. First let’s get out the carrots. Then the onions. Ooo, I need a cutting board and a knife too! Alright, let’s cut! Cut, cut, cut the carrots.

- “I want to draw with you! Hmmm, I wonder what I should draw…. I’m gonna draw a house. I’m gonna draw a red house! First I’ll draw the walls... “

Parallel Talk

Say aloud what the person is doing. Note what you notice about what they are doing. Be specific!

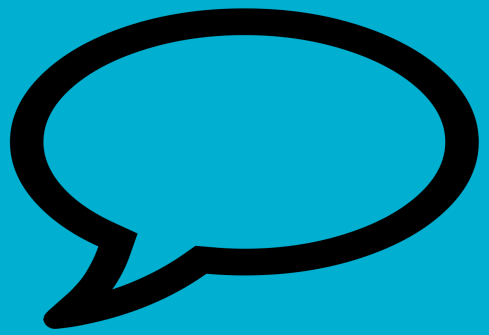


Examples:

- “You’re building a train track! That train is going over the bridge. Oh, now it’s next to the tree. The train is going really fast!

- “You are swinging. Wow, you are going so high! You are pumping with your legs so you go higher and higher!”

Comment



Make statements rather than ask questions to engage.
Conversations are about give and take, not interrogation!

Examples:

- “You’re flipping through that atlas again. It’s fun to learn about new places.”

- “You’re spinning in circles so fast! That looks like fun!”

Ask Open Ended Questions or Wonder statements

- Ask questions that elicit novel language and responses beyond yes/no or single words.
- You can also use “I wonder” statements to elicit generative language responses.

Examples:

- “What are some things you like to do at the park? “
- “I wonder what animals we might see at the zoo today. “

Recasting /Expansions

- Restate what the child said using a longer and grammatical sentence (expansion); or add information to what the child said (extension).

- Provide an enhanced and/or contrasting version of that utterance by changing one or more sentence components, while maintaining basic meaning

- Example:
  - Student - “want that”
  - Communication Partner - “you want that blue car. You want that race car to go fast.”

Pause

- Offer think time before expecting a response and refrain from asking multiple questions.

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