

Inclusive AAC in Education: Practical Strategies for Access and Participation

2026 NJSHA Convention

Presenters: Jennifer O'Donnell, Ph.D., CCC-SLP, Gabriella Wendling, M.S., CCC-SLP, &

Lauren Padula, M.S., CCC-SLP

4/17/26, 8:45 AM- 10:45 AM

**Please Note: A QR Code linking to a copy of our full presentation slides will be provided during the live presentation on 4/17/26.*

Abstract

This presentation emphasizes the importance of centering student augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) users in the AAC evaluation and implementation process. By integrating principles from Disability Studies in Education, Universal Design for Learning, and the Neurodiversity Movement, this session explores how speech-language pathologists, educators, support staff, and related service providers can create inclusive learning environments that honor the diverse communication modalities of students.

Key themes include advocating for presuming competence, access to robust vocabulary, supporting communication autonomy, and embracing neurodiversity. Through practical strategies and case studies, attendees will gain insights into fostering inclusion and increasing communication access for AAC users.

Learning Outcomes

Following this session, participants will be able to:

1. Discuss ways to center student AAC users by enabling them to actively participate in decision-making processes and ensuring their individual wants, needs, and desires are prioritized.
2. Recommend practical strategies to foster inclusion and enhance communication access for student AAC users.
3. Identify strategies professionals can use to advocate for prioritizing the wants, needs, and desires of student AAC users.

Presentation Outline

- **Why Inclusive AAC Matters**

- Communication is a fundamental human right. When students cannot communicate effectively, they may experience barriers to:
 - Academic participation
 - Social relationships
 - Expressing preferences and opinions
 - Demonstrating knowledge
- AAC is not simply a tool; it provides access to participation, relationships, and learning.

- **Frameworks Supporting Inclusive AAC**

- Inclusive AAC practices are supported by several important frameworks.
 - Disability Studies in Education (DSE)
 - Encourages moving away from deficit-based models (e.g., the medical model)
 - Focuses on access, participation, and belonging
 - Neurodiversity Movement
 - Recognizes neurological differences as natural variations in human experience
 - Values diverse communication styles
 - Encourages respect for neurodivergent communication
 - Universal Design for Learning (UDL)
 - UDL promotes accessible instruction through:
 - Multiple means of engagement
 - Multiple means of representation
 - Multiple means of expression
 - These frameworks support classrooms where communication access is embedded into instruction rather than added later as an accommodation.
 - Presuming Competence
 - Presuming competence means believing that students who use AAC are capable of learning, understanding, and communicating meaningful ideas when given appropriate supports.
 - Examples of Limiting Practices

- Restricting vocabulary
- Overprompting
- Allowing communication only for requesting
- Excluding students from decisions about their communication systems
- Low expectations can unintentionally limit opportunities for language development, participation, and autonomy.

- **Centering AAC Users in Decision Making**

- Students who use AAC should be included in decisions about their communication supports whenever possible.
- Incorporating Student Interests
 - Vocabulary should include:
 - Preferred activities
 - Favorite topics
 - Familiar people and places
 - Meaningful vocabulary increases motivation, engagement, and communication opportunities.
- Supporting Choice and Self-Advocacy
 - Students can communicate preferences related to:
 - Activities
 - Materials
 - Communication partners
 - Classroom roles
 - Providing these opportunities promotes communication, autonomy, and self-determination.

- **Access to Robust Vocabulary**

- AAC systems should support generative language, allowing students to create their own messages.
- Core Vocabulary
 - High-frequency words used across contexts.
 - Examples: go, want, help, more, stop
- Fringe Vocabulary
 - Topic-specific or personalized words.
 - Examples: favorite foods, activities, people

- Robust AAC systems support:
 - Language development
 - Academic participation
 - Storytelling and commenting
- Examples of Limiting Systems
 - Request-only boards
 - Choice boards with limited vocabulary
 - Devices restricted to preprogrammed phrases
- Supporting Multimodal Communication
 - Students communicate using many modalities, including:
 - Speech
 - AAC systems
 - Gestures
 - Echolalia or scripting
 - Typing
 - Facial expressions and body language
- AAC does not replace speech; it expands communication.
- Inclusive classrooms recognize and support multimodal communication.

- **Practical Strategies to Increase Communication Access**
 - Manual Communication Boards
 - Examples include:
 - Classroom core boards
 - Desk-size boards
 - Playground communication boards
 - Activity-specific boards
 - Benefits:
 - Support aided language modeling
 - Increase communication opportunities
 - Encourage peer interaction
 - SmartBoard Communication Displays
 - Interactive classroom displays can support whole-class AAC modeling.
 - Examples:
 - Core vocabulary boards
 - Commenting phrases
 - Discussion prompts
 - Lesson-specific vocabulary

- Shared Reading with AAC Supports
 - Shared reading creates opportunities for language and literacy participation.
 - AAC supports may include:
 - Story vocabulary boards
 - Character and action symbols
 - Commenting phrases
 - Prediction prompts

- **Advocacy for Communication Access**
 - Speech-language pathologists, educators, and related service providers play an essential role in advocating for AAC users.
 - Advocacy includes ensuring students have:
 - Appropriate AAC systems
 - Communication supports across environments
 - Trained communication partners
 - Opportunities to express wants, needs, and ideas
 - Strategies for Advocacy
 - Professionals can advocate by:
 - Incorporating communication access into IEP goals
 - Collaborating with educators and support staff
 - Modeling AAC strategies during instruction
 - Reframing behavior as communication
 - Ensuring devices and supports are available across settings