



Clarification Strategies for Communication Partners of Individuals Using Augmentative & Alternative Communication (AAC)

There are many different strategies that a communication partner can use to help an individual clarify their speech, to ensure their intended message is being understood, using AAC!

Clarification strategies are used for individuals who:

- Use speech as their primary mode of communication
- Have difficulty being understood in some or all situations because of unclear speech
- Experience frustration, social withdrawal or limited conversational topics due to repeated experiences of communication breakdown

Communication breakdowns happen to everyone and can make us feel frustrated and unheard. Now, imagine how difficult it is for someone who uses AAC to repair communication breakdowns.

It is important as a communication partner to learn about some clarification strategies that they can use to help the individual:

- Increase successful communication experiences
- Improve social participation
- Increase an individual's range of conversational topics
- Facilitate continued development of expressive language skills

Most AAC systems that are designed for individuals, who use them to clarify their speech, have pre-programmed clarification messages. These messages may include, "You are getting close," "Keep guessing," "You are way off." They also typically have access to a keyboard with word prediction, so that they are able to spell out words or provide the first letter of a word. However, just because these messages appear on their AAC system, it does not mean that the individual will automatically know how to use them. It is important for their communication partners to teach the individual how to use these messages effectively.

When a communication breakdown starts to occur:

- Tell the individual that you don't understand them, don't pretend that you do.
- Repeat what you think you did understand.
 - "I heard you say..."
- Encourage the individual to keep trying.
- Ask them to start spelling it, by pointing to the first letter of every word. Help the individual navigate to the keyboard if they are unfamiliar with where to find it.
 - Use the keyboard with word prediction in their AAC system.

- Ask them to tell you the topic. Help the individual navigate to the topic category if they are unfamiliar with where to find it.
 - Use the topic category (person, place, home, school, etc.) in their AAC system.
- Ask them to:
 - Slow down.
 - Say it in a different way.
 - Tell you more.
 - Show you (by pointing to something or acting it out)
- Try to understand the topic by asking a question. Encourage them to use their AAC system to say something that will give you more information.
 - “What is it about?”
 - “Who is it about?”
 - “Where did it happen?”
 - “When did it happen?”
- Ask yes/no questions. Start with general questions and then get more specific. Use the topic category in the individual’s AAC system and select the word as you ask the question, to provide them with a model.
 - “Are you talking about something at home?” while selecting “home.”
 - “Are you talking about a person?” while selecting “people.”
 - “Are you talking about something at school?” while selecting “school.”

(Ideas for Implementing Strategies to Help Clarify Speech Attempts – Bloorview MacMillan Children’s Centre, Communication & Writing Aids Service)

Once you discover what the individual is talking about, celebrate and take this opportunity to explain how some of the core words (frequently used words), topics or pre-programmed messages might be used to help explain what they were trying to communicate. This provides the individual with a model so that they learn strategies to fix communication breakdowns when they occur. It is also a good time to determine if that word needs to be added to the individuals AAC system.

It is important that all communication partners are aware of the strategies that the individual who uses AAC might want to use, to increase successful interactions. The role of the communication partner is crucial!

Please note that the Augmentative Communication Program provides services on a consultative basis. If you or someone else working with the individual may benefit from more information or training, has questions or concerns or requires technical support, please do not hesitate to contact us.

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