Getting Started with AAC
Choosing, trialling and obtaining a communication device

Why use a communication device?
Individuals with complex communication needs have difficulty communicating using speech. They may be able to communicate using gestures, facial expressions or limited speech, but often they are unable to express themselves clearly and efficiently so that others can understand them. Many individuals with complex communication needs benefit from Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) to enable them to communicate. AAC refers to a broad range of strategies and tools which can be used to enhance communication, and includes communication devices. A communication device is an electronic tool with voice output. The individual presses a touch screen or buttons and the device speaks messages aloud. A communication device can assist to promote independence and participation.

Finding the right communication device
There are many communication devices on the market and it is not a case of one device fits all. The device needs to be tailored to the abilities and requirements of the individual. Choosing the right device can sometimes be a long and involved process. It requires a team approach and you will be working closely with your Speech Pathologist throughout the process. Other members of the team, such as your Occupational Therapist, Teacher, Education Assistant, Support Workers may also be involved. Working together and joint decision making is essential for positive outcomes.

The Assessment Process
Your Speech Pathologist needs to gather information about the individual’s skills and abilities and discuss their goals and requirements. This will help to determine the features that are needed from a communication device.
Some of the many questions which need to be answered in order to prescribe the right communication device include:

- How will the individual access the device? Will they use direct access (finger pointing) or require alternative access methods (such as scanning with an external switch or eye gaze)?
- What language representation method will be used? (single meaning pictures, semantic compaction, or alphabet based systems)
- What environments will the device need to be used in?
- What vocabulary will the individual require on the on the device? Will categories of words need to be linked dynamically to more vocabulary?
- Are accessories such as a key guard, carry case, or mount required to access the device?

Looking at devices
Once you have determined the features that are required from a communication device, you can go have a look at the options that meet your requirements. Your service provider may have some devices that they can demonstrate to you, but often your Speech Pathologist may suggest a visit to the Independent Living Centre of WA to view the range of options.

This resource was developed by the Independent Living Centre WA.
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Trial process
Before funding for your device can be approved, you will need to trial the device, usually in the home environment. It can also be useful to trial the communication device in a range of settings where it might be used, such as school, work and out and about in the community.

Before the device trial
Often there are other people also waiting to try the same device. This wait time to trial a particular device can vary, and can be up to 3-4 months long. This is often the case for new and popular devices on the market. This period can be invaluable to your team in preparing for the trial phase. It is a good time to jointly develop specific goals for trial, to discuss vocabulary requirements and layout considerations. For certain types of devices, you can download the software to any computer and become familiar with it and customise it even if you don’t have the actual device in front of you. This means that you spend time customising the device’s software to suit the individual, and then keep it ready for when the actual device arrives for trial. It also gives you time to make sure you know what to expect and what you need to do during the trial. Speak to your Speech Pathologist about how to make the most of this time to prepare for the trial.

During the device trial
The device trial is usually for 4 weeks, depending on the funding source and the hire provider. The trial gives valuable information about how the device is meeting the individual’s needs, and what (if anything) needs to be modified. During the trial, you will be expected to:
- Maximise use of the device everyday
- Model vocabulary using the device
- Learn how to program vocabulary
- Maintain the device for daily use
- Collect data and record observations about the individual’s use of the device.

Your Speech Pathologist will generally come out to support you at least once a week during the trial phase. At each appointment, they will be collecting data and examples of how the device is being used to support a potential funding application.

If the trial does not go well, you can try other devices until you find the one that is right for the individual. Or the team may consider using low-tech communication options (such as paper based communication books) for the time being to build important skills. Low tech systems are also valuable, and are often be used in conjunction in communication devices, for example when the device is not available, or the battery is flat.

After the device trial
If the device trial was successful, your Speech Pathologist will often write a report for funding purposes. Your Speech Pathologist will be advised if the application is approved and then your family will be notified. If the application is not approved, additional information or trials may be required, or you may seek alternative funding. Your Speech Pathologist can advise you about the next possible steps.
Funding for a communication device
Early in the process you and your speech pathologist will need to determine how the communication device will be funded.

The Community Aids & Equipment Program (CAEP) administered by Disability Services Commission is the funding body for most individuals with a permanent disability. For more information: [http://ilc.com.au/resources/2/0000/7735/ilc_tech_caep_communication_device_information_for_families.pdf](http://ilc.com.au/resources/2/0000/7735/ilc_tech_caep_communication_device_information_for_families.pdf)

If you are in a National Disability Insurance Scheme Trial Site (NDIS) you will access funding for a communication device through your plan. You will need to ensure that you have funding in your plan for speech pathology services for assessment, trialling and training for assistive equipment and technology. For more information on funding for equipment through NDIS please contact your service provider or planner.

Both the CAEP and NDIS funding schemes have refurbished devices available which may be provided if they meet your needs. All refurbished devices are in full working order.

The CAEP and NDIS programs will cover the cost of a communication device. This includes trialling the device, software, protective coverings and any repairs that might be needed whilst in your care. You may be asked to insure the device while it is on trial. Once funded the equipment is on loan to you until you no longer require it.

Sometimes you may decide to self-fund a communication device. If you choose to self-fund the above funding schemes do not cover repair.

What else you need to know

Be prepared to invest time and effort in learning how to use the device
Choosing the right communication device does not mean that the individual will be able to communicate functionally and effortlessly straight away. Communication partners need to take the time to learn the device and use it themselves so they can ‘model’ language to the individual. It will take some time learning and using the device before the individual is able to use it independently.

Vocabulary needs change over time
Your Speech Pathologist will guide you in choosing the right vocabulary to display on the communication device. However an individual’s vocabulary needs change over time. During and after the trial period you will need to learn how to edit and customise vocabulary on the device. After the device is funded, it is important to keep the device up to date with vocabulary that the individual is likely to use. Your Speech Pathologist will provide you with resources and training to enable to you keep vocabulary up to date.
Ongoing support
After a communication device is prescribed, your team will be able to provide you with some ongoing support and training in how to use and implement the device. Speak to your service provider about how much support is available to you. Your Speech Pathologist may also link you in with other AAC support services.

Backing up your device
It is important to back up your device programming on a regular basis. This will ensure that your customised vocabulary is safely saved in case something happens to the device. Each device has a different back up process. Ask your Speech Pathologist for instructions or refer to your device manual.

Low Tech Back Up
Electronic communication devices are great but sometimes they break down! It is important that you have a paper communication aid for times when your electronic device requires repair, battery charging, you are outside at the beach etc. Many of the devices have a paper version you can create.

What is the difference between communication devices and voice output communication devices?
A communication device refers to any electronic communication aid. It is also known as a voice output communication aid or speech generating device. These terms are interchangeable.

Resources
Independent Living Centre has a range of handouts and information on AAC: http://ilc.com.au/ilc-tech-resources-communication/

You can search the Independent Living Centres Australia website under Communication Speak, Read, Listen: http://ilcaustralia.org.au/search_category_paths

Rocky Bay Positive AACtion Information Kit for AAC Teams: http://www.rockybay.org.au/go/services/clinical-services-directorate/resources/information-kit-for-aac-teams