What is Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC)?

A Communication Aid enables a person to communicate more effectively with those around them when they cannot depend upon their own speech. Communication aids are also known as Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) systems. AAC devices can be no tech (gesture and signing), low tech (paper based devices), mid tech (simple electronic speaking devices) or high tech (computer based devices).

Mid and High Tech Devices

At BCAS we specialise in mid and high tech devices. These devices allow people to use a machine to have a voice. They vary to suit the individual's abilities and needs.

Examples of communication devices

- Dedicated communication aids – These are designed with communication as their main function. They may include software, mounting options and inbuilt speakers. They may be more simple devices which can record several messages on one device.

Selection of Dedicated Communication Aids
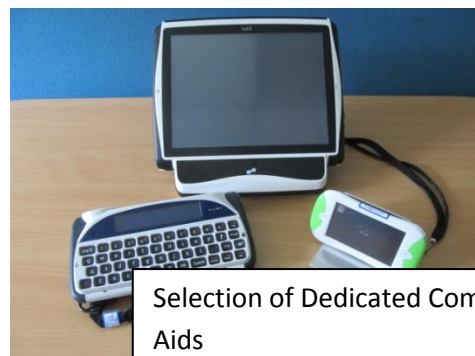
- Tablets running communication Apps. These tablets may have a variety of operating systems such as Windows, iOS and Android.

Selection of Tablets and Software

- PCs or Laptops running communication software.

- Multi functioning devices – Many of the above aids may also enable access to the internet, access to email, storage of photos, videos and music, send and receive texts or control a wheelchair and household appliances such as the television.

There are also a number of ways an individual might access a device depending on their abilities.

Examples of Access Methods

- Direct access – typing on a keyboard, using a touch screen or using a head pointer
- Switch operated - A button is used to control the device, for example by scanning through a keyboard or list of vocabulary
- Eye Gaze – A specialist camera allows an individual to control a computer with their eyes.

Eye Gaze device

Symbols, photo or Text based AAC.

Communication Devices can be symbol, photo or text based and often combine all three.

Symbol or Photo based communication aids may be used by people who find it difficult to read and/or spell. This may be as a consequence of a stroke, a deteriorating neurological condition or a brain injury. Symbol based communication aids are also useful when working with children who have not yet developed, or have difficulty developing, literacy.
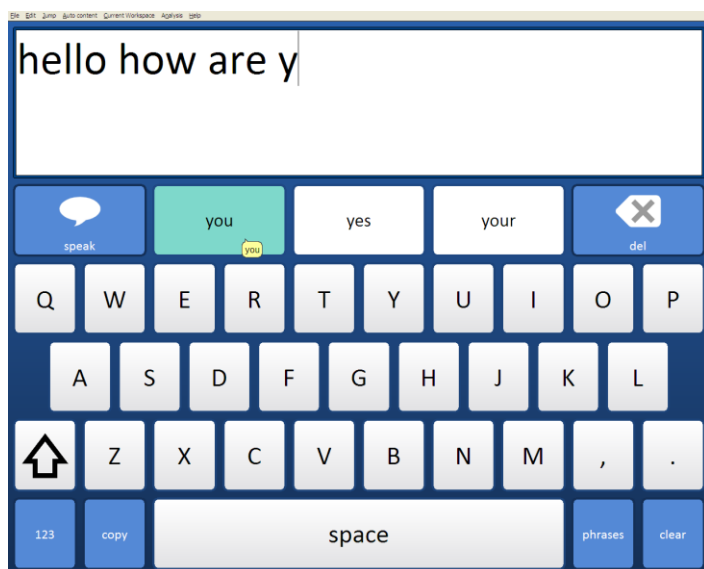

Example of Symbol based software
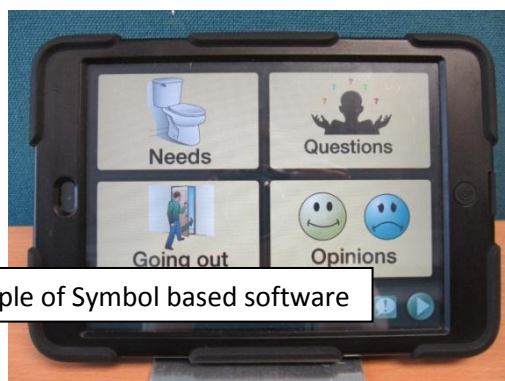
Symbols offer a visual representation of a word or idea. They are often very simple illustrations. There are a number of different symbol sets, such as Widgit Literacy Symbols, Picture Communication Symbols, Makaton Symbols and SymbolStix. The symbol sets follow a theme that makes it easier to understand. For example the same stick man is used throughout the set to represent different words and meanings. Symbols can be put together to create sentences, or one symbol can

have a longer message behind it. For example a symbol of a person in bed may have a single word behind it such as "sleep", or a full sentence behind it 'I want to go to sleep'

Photos of common items, people, places or feelings can be also be useful to help individuals locate words and ideas. Photos can be particularly helpful to personalise vocabulary, for example having a photo of the individual's home rather than a symbol of a generic house.

Text based communication programmes are used by individuals with literacy, and they may use a physical keyboard or an on screen keyboard accessed for example by touch, eye gaze or switch. Individual's type out their message and this is spoken by the device. It is also possible to use predictive text to help support faster communication.

Both text and symbol based vocabulary are often combined to support people with limited literacy or emerging literacy.