

Disability Information

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) is the broad term used to describe the many communication methods which support or replace speech.

Augmentative and Alternative Communication can help people express their needs, hopes and ideas, to connect with their family and friends, to communicate in the workplace, access education, understand more about the world around them and direct others who care for them.



Why use Augmentative and Alternative Communication

AAC can be used to help a person understand what is being said to them and/or to help a person express what they want to say. It can be useful for both short and long-term communication needs.

AAC may be suggested for people who have communication difficulties associated with other disabilities, such as intellectual or physical disability, brain injury or progressive neurological disability.

Types of Augmentative and Alternative Communication

There are many types of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) which can be broadly grouped into Unaided AAC, Non-electronic AAC and Electronic AAC.

Unaided AAC

Unaided AAC describes communication that does not require any assistive devices. There are three types of unaided AAC:

- **Key Word Signing** – the use of hand signs and gestures with people who can hear but cannot talk, who are difficult to understand, or who have difficulty understanding other people.
- **Body Sign** – modified or individualised signs are performed onto the hands or another part of a person's body for people who are both sight and hearing impaired.
- **Touch Cues** – the use of contacts to the body (such as a tap on the elbow or a firm hold on the shoulder) which help people understand and anticipate actions or activities in their lives.

Non-Electronic AAC

Non-Electronic AAC is the use of pictures, symbols, spelling and written words or phrases to communicate. There is no voice output when using non-electronic AAC.

Types of Non-Electronic AAC include:

- **Writing and drawing** can be used instead of speech or to help others understand when speech is slurred, unclear or quiet.
- **Visual strategies**, also known as visual helpers, are used to:
 - request things, actions and events
 - make choices
 - express feelings and opinions
 - discuss future activities.
- **Communication boards** consist of one-page boards and can use any type or combination of symbols, photos, words or alphabet. They can be designed to suit individual needs from simple choice-making to communicating longer sentences.
- **Communication Books** feature lists of words organised into a book format using any type or combination of symbols, photos, words or alphabet. They can be designed to suit individual needs from simple choice-making to communicating longer sentences.
- **Community Access Cards** are business cards that describe a person's speech difficulty and how and why they use AAC.
- **Communication Profiles** record the ways that a person communicates including the goals and plans for developing their communication skills.
- **'About Me' books and Chat books** include information such as likes, dislikes, activities, recent news and the important people and things in their lives.
- **Personal Signing and Communication Dictionaries** consist of a written record of signs, gestures and behaviours used for communication. These dictionaries are often created when a person communicates using informal body movements, facial expressions and vocalisations.

Electronic AAC

Electronic AAC is the use of any electronic equipment to communicate when speech is limited or unable to be used. Types of electronic AAC include:

- **Voice Amplifiers** use a microphone near the person's mouth or voice box to amplify the voice.
- **Speech Generating Devices (SGDs)** are used to create messages to be spoken out loud. The voice can be a recorded message or it may be one of the many synthesised voices available. SGDs may use any type or combination of symbols, photos, words or alphabet. SGDs can be designed to suit individual needs from simple choice-making to communicating longer sentences.
- **Communication Software** describes a range of AAC software programs available for tablet computers, laptops and personal computers. The programs may suit individual communication needs from single messages through to

communicating in longer sentences. Some of the programs can be used to create non-electronic AAC resources.

- **Communication Apps**, also known as “Apps for AAC”, refers to the range of AAC applications available to download to iOS devices (iPad/iPhone/iPod) or Android devices. They vary in price and can suit a range of communication needs from single messages through to communicating in longer sentences. Internet access is required to purchase and download the apps and to back up the settings once programmed.

Factors to consider when exploring AAC

There are a number of factors to consider when matching a person’s communication needs to the features of AAC assistive devices.

Sourcing the right equipment

We recommend consulting a speech pathologist before buying any specialised equipment. Speech pathologists assess for, prescribe, and teach people how to use AAC assistive devices. They also train communication partners (family, friends and carers who spend time talking with people who use AAC) and support future skill development.

Cost

The cost of AAC equipment including ongoing maintenance, repair and replacement need to be considered as costs may vary from free through to thousands of dollars. Funding support is sometimes available.

Training and support

Product training and technical support may be available from suppliers. Some speech pathologists and occupational therapists may also provide training and support as part of their services.

Skills and needs of the person who requires AAC

- How does the person communicate already and what are the goals for introducing AAC methods?
- What is the person’s understanding of what is said to them and what is their ability to learn and remember new skills
- Can the person use alphabet or words, or do they need to learn one of the many symbol sets that are available?
- Which specific words or phrases will the person need to communicate with family, friends, carers and colleagues? Will the person create their own sentences, or will they use pre-stored phrases and sentences?
- Are there visual, physical or cognitive issues that will restrict the size and number of items available on the AAC device?
- Which voice/speech output would be best suited to the person who will be using the AAC device?
- Does the person require additional features such as computer access or environmental control?

Portability and durability of ACC equipment

- How will the person have the AAC equipment available to them throughout their day? Some AAC devices can be handheld or carried in a bag. Heavier devices attach to wheelchairs or beds or use floor mounts. An occupational therapist, physiotherapist, wheelchair seating technician, supplier or speech pathologist can advise you.
- Does the AAC device need features such as rugged or water-resistant covers?

Accessing and Operating the AAC Device

- How will the person operate the AAC system? Can they point and turn pages, or do they need to use alternative methods to access such as a pointer/stylus, joystick, switch, head pointing or eye gaze system? Occupational therapists and speech pathologists can assist with alternative accessing methods.
- We recommend having a non-electronic AAC option to complement and back-up any electronic AAC device.

Receive specific advice about AAC options

For specific advice about the many AAC options and techniques available, please consult a speech pathologist.

Contacting the Independent Living Centre

For further information or to make an appointment to visit the display please contact the Independent Living Centre. The Independent Living Centre offers free advice on equipment and techniques to help you with everyday tasks.

Independent Living Centre
11 Blacks Road
Gilles Plains SA 5086

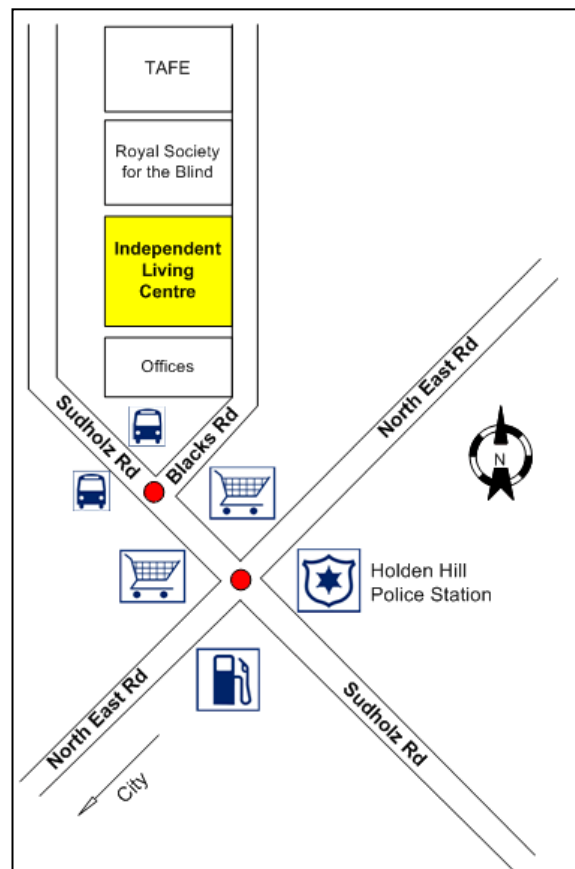
Phone: 1300 885 886 (SA & NT callers only) or 8266 5260

Email: ilcsa@sa.gov.au

Website: www.sa.gov.au/disability/ilc

Accessible off street parking is available.

Bus services run nearby. Call 8210 1000 for timetable information.



Copies of this publication are available from the Independent Living Centre Tel: 1300 885 886 SA/NT callers only) or 8266 5260 Email: ilcsa@sa.gov.au Website: www.sa.gov.au/disability/ilc Version: March 2019



Licensed under Creative Commons <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0>
Attribute to: *The Department of Human Services, Government of South Australia*