

## **Supporting Emergent Communicators: More than Aided AAC Modeling**

Jane Farrall<sup>1</sup>

Helen Tainsh<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jane Farrall Consulting

<sup>2</sup> Helen Tainsh Speech Pathology

### **Short Abstract**

Aided AAC Modeling is evidence-based practice for supporting individuals to learn to use AAC. It has been shown to have a range of outcomes, including building receptive language, increasing expressive communication, developing syntax and morphology, and positive gains in semantics and pragmatics.

Research with emergent communicators who also have significant learning challenges is sparse, due to the difficulties in conducting research with this group. However, we do have some studies that demonstrate that Aided AAC Modeling can assist individuals in this group to develop language

As in typical language learning, when AAC is used for augmented input, the AAC learner is not expected to immediately imitate or use the modeled concept. This means that the focus of AAC intervention with pre-symbolic communicators is to provide high-quality instruction to communication partners in the individual's natural environment (Wandin et al, 2023).

This workshop will focus on the elements of high-quality instruction that the presenters have found successful in supporting emergent communicators with significant learning challenges to develop receptive and expressive communication, including expressive symbolic communication. We will provide information about these elements, supported by videos. In addition to the above we will discuss some of the factors we have found are important in implementing AAC with emergent communicators, including assessment, electronic and non-electronic AAC strengths and weaknesses, and the significance of identifying and addressing sensory requirements.

### **Long Abstract**

Aided Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) Modeling is when communication partners combine their own speech with pointing at picture symbols, with or without voice output. Aided AAC Modeling is referred to by many different names, including aided language stimulation, augmented input, modeling and natural aided language stimulation. Whichever name we use, Aided AAC Modeling is an evidence-based practice for supporting individuals to learn to use AAC. "It is recommended that aided language stimulation and related aided language modeling strategies be used to support the learning of functional communication skills and use of speech generating device systems with children in the

language acquisition stage of development who have limited to no verbal communication" (Justice et al, 2018).

Aided AAC Modeling has been shown to support receptive language development (Sennott, 2106, Laher & Dada, 2023), increases in expressive communication (Binger et al, 2008; Iacono & Duncum, 1995; Kent-Walsh et al, 2015; Ronski et al, 2010; Sennott et al, 2016; Solomon-Rice & Soto, 2014), development of syntax and morphology, (Binger et al, 2008; Branson & Demchak, 2009, Iacono & Duncum, 1995; Kent-Walsh et al, 2015; Ronski et al, 2010; Sennott et al, 2016; Solomon-Rice & Soto, 2014) and in positive gains in Semantics and Pragmatics (Binger et al, 2008; Iacono & Duncum, 1995; Kent-Walsh et al, 2015; Ronski et al, 2010; Sennott et al, 2016; Solomon-Rice & Soto, 2014).

“An Emergent communicator can communicate expressively but tends to use body language, gestures or vocalisation that need to be interpreted by others rather than through symbols, signs or words to autonomously express what they are thinking. Sometimes emergent communicators may say or imitate messages with symbols, signs or words but it tends to be in response to prompts and cues rather than an autonomous message. The general point is that emergent communicators are communicating, but it often can't be understood by less familiar people and needs to be interpreted by a familiar person to them.” Sampson, 2019

Additionally, emergent communication may happen in different ways. These include:

- behaviors interpreted by others, such as licking your lips because you are thirsty;
- purposeful nonsymbolic signals such as clapping your hands for enjoyment;
- and representational symbol forms, such as banging a cup on a table for more drink (Ogletree et al, 2022).

Research with emergent communicators who also have significant learning challenges is sparse, due to the difficulties in conducting research with this group. However, we do have some studies (e.g. Laher & Dada, 2023) that demonstrate that Aided AAC Modeling can assist individuals in this group to develop language.

Aided AAC Modeling, when used for augmented input, aims to imitate the interaction of typical spoken language and communication development, in which parents' attribute meaning to neurotypical emergent communicators. With this in mind, we aim to embed symbols into everyday routines across the day, This counteracts the fact that emergent communicators receive most of their language input in spoken form but are expected to communicate and use language in aided form (Sennott et al, 2016; O'Neill et al, 2018). Aided AAC Modeling is also intended to demonstrate that Aided AAC is a communication tool.

As in typical language learning, when AAC is used for augmented input, the AAC learner is not expected to immediately imitate or use the modeled concept. This means that the focus of AAC intervention with pre-symbolic communicators is to provide high-quality instruction to communication partners in the individual's natural environment (Wandin et al, 2023).

This workshop will focus on the elements of high-quality instruction that the presenters have found successful in supporting emergent communicators with significant learning challenges to develop receptive and expressive communication, including expressive symbolic communication.

Aided AAC Modeling for emergent communicators should include a number of important skills that communication partners need to develop. These include:

- following the individual's lead and attributing meaning to their behaviours;
- verbally referencing the individual's behaviours and mapping these with AAC;
- modelling language and communication that the individual would also be interested in using;
- an awareness of early communication functions and a focus on these in augmented input; and
- modeling throughout the day, using symbols for real reasons, repeatedly, in a range of environments.

This workshop will provide information about each of these skills, supported by videos. In addition to the above we will discuss some of the factors we have found are important in implementing AAC with emergent communicators, including electronic and non-electronic AAC strengths and weaknesses, and the significance of identifying and addressing sensory requirements.

We also acknowledge that Aided AAC Modeling implementation with individuals is also more successful when accompanied by assessment, as discussed by Ogletree et al (2022).