

Alternative Augmentative Communication Policy

Policy Aims

- To promote a consistent understanding of Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC) and use of the term
- To highlight the need for AAC assessment and multi-disciplinary working
- To outline the role of the Speech and Language Therapist and Occupational Therapist in relation to AAC
- To outline the role of the Multi-Disciplinary Team (MDT) and family in relation to AAC

School Objectives

- To ensure all learners at BeyondAutism have access to an appropriate form of AAC specific to their communication needs.
- To ensure all learners at BeyondAutism are able to express their wants and needs and promote safety using appropriate AAC.
- To recognise that all communication methods are valued and accepted equally.
- To ensure staff at BeyondAutism are confident, well informed and trained in approaches to communicating with pupils using a variety of Total Communication methods

This Policy should be read in conjunction with our Therapy Policy.

Introduction

BeyondAutism is committed to providing an environment where all communication is valued and developed and follows a total communication approach. Total communication (also known as inclusive communication) is an approach which facilitates and promotes any and all necessary mode(s) of communication; including (but not limited to) speech, sign language, use of symbols, photographs, objects, gesture and writing or drawing. Behaviour that challenges is also considered a form of Total Communication. This approach is inclusive and supports all pupils to reduce communication barriers using forms of AAC where appropriate.

What is AAC?

AAC stands for 'Alternative and Augmentative Communication'. AAC refers to the methods by which an individual can replace ('alternative') or supplement ('augment') spoken communication. AAC may also be used to support a pupil's understanding, by providing the pupil with a more permanent visual representation of language.

AAC encompasses a variety of communication methods and can be further broken down into unaided and aided communication.

Unaided communication

Unaided communication refers to the use of no additional equipment. This includes:

- Body language- e.g. facial expression, gesture, posture
- Sign languages – e.g. Makaton, British Sign Language
- Gestural strategies – e.g. pointing, leading others to items/ locations

Aided communication

Aided communication refers to the use of additional resources. This includes:

- Symbols – low-tech systems e.g. communication books, PECS, Choice Boards etc
- Photos – low-tech systems e.g. communication books, PECS, Choice Boards etc
- Objects – e.g. Objects of Reference (using a cup to request a drink), Attention Buttons
- Voice Output Communication Aids (VOCAs) – high tech devices, for example; iPads with Communication Apps such as ProLoQuo2Go, Predictable and GridPlayer, as well as GoTalks, eye-gaze devices, attention buttons (vocal programmed) amongst others.

AAC Use at BeyondAutism

BeyondAutism is committed to accepting all forms of communication and viewing these equally.

Pupils at BeyondAutism have a range of AAC methods available including:

- Symbols (Widgit is BeyondAutism's preferred symbol set)
- PECS
- Photographs/ Pictures
- Objects of Reference
- Communication Books
- Makaton/ Adapted Sign
- Single message devices – e.g. Big Mack buttons
- Voice Output Communication Aids (VOCA)/Speech Generated Devices (SGD) e.g. iPad with a Communication App.

At BeyondAutism, we expect the student's AAC device to be:

- Used by the learner as independently as possible
- Accessible to the student at all times throughout the school day in **all** appropriate and feasible situations.
- Used by the adult working with the student. This is called 'Aided Language Stimulation'.
- Charged (if applicable), complete and accessible.
- In sound working order. Any technical issues need to be reported to the SaLT or OT and if appropriate given to Site Managers to fix as soon as possible and **within one working day** of any issues being noted.
- Readily available to the learner at all times
- Backed up electronically & replaceable (e.g. Choice boards etc should have a saved soft copy, high-tech app profiles should be saved to Dropbox with an equivalent low-tech method available as back up if the iPad/ app should break). All staff working with the student are accountable for ensuring a back-up is place.
- Never withheld or removed in any circumstance without consultation with the Speech and Language Therapist
- Used in the home environment, if appropriate and possible.

AAC Assessment and Review

The Speech and Language Therapists have ultimate accountability for assessment and decisions made with regard to the suitability of AAC methods. The professional expertise of the Speech and Language Therapists must be included in any decision-making process involving AAC. This ensures best practice decisions are made in line with the latest evidence-based practice.

When a learner's current method of communication is not fulfilling their communicative needs, or is hindering their progress in other areas, an MDT approach is essential to ensure that any needs are raised with the SaLT. Everyone working with the learner is encouraged to raise this with the SaLT. This is important as we spend less time with our learners than their class teams do, and so we may not know as quickly that the communication system needs updating. The experience and knowledge of the learner across their school day is vital for our input to be as effective as possible.

When a pupil is identified as needing assessment the following steps will be taken:

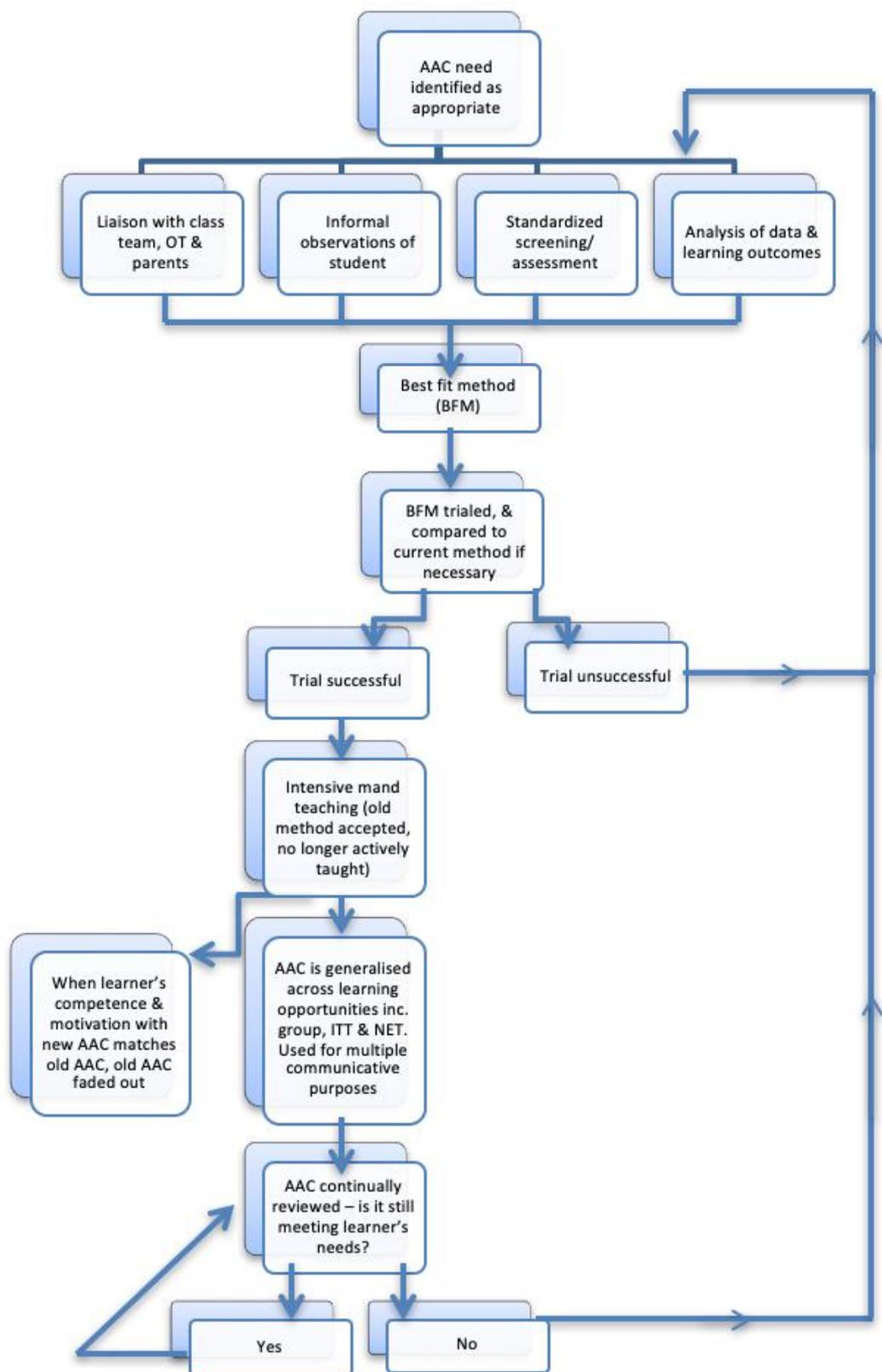


Fig. 1 AAC Assessment Flowchart

- We will ensure an MDT approach to assessment, which includes but is not limited to, the Speech and Language Therapist, the ABA Supervisor, and the Occupational Therapist.
- Any AAC assessment including the Essentials for Living should be carried out alongside and with the professional guidance of the Speech and Language Therapist.
- Assessment should include observation of the learner, analysis of data, discussion with the MDT (including Parents/ Guardians) and some form of standardised screening or testing as a minimum.

AAC Device Trials

A range of AAC devices are available to our learners to trial during the assessment process. The use of these within the assessment process is vital in ensuring the trial is effective and clearly demonstrates whether there is a need for AAC. We endeavour to ensure that AAC device trials are extended into the home environment. We will require families to contractually agree to the maintenance of these devices outside of the school environment. This contract clearly stipulates any reasonable financial penalty to damage caused to the device outside of the school environment.

When success of the AAC has been identified, BeyondAutism can make a case to the Local Authority to fund the device so that it becomes the learner's property. For the funding application to be successful, the evidence we provide must be complete and watertight. This is why accurate, complete and contemporaneous collection of data is imperative. Consideration will be given by the SaLT to include this provision within Section G – Health, of the EHCP to support funding decisions being agreed in a timely manner.

Pupils who enter the school with an existing AAC system will have their use of the system reviewed in line with need and development. AAC systems will remain in place unless there are indications that a different form of AAC would be more suitable. Removing any AAC system from a child without multi-disciplinary discussion and sound, justifiable rationale is deemed unethical.

Referrals to outside AAC agencies

BeyondAutism will work with outside agencies, e.g. Specialised AAC assessment services to ensure they are receiving the most up to date knowledge on a range of communication strategies. In some circumstances it may be necessary for a pupil to be assessed for a high-tech AAC device by a specialist working within this area of expertise. A referral must be made by the Speech and Language Therapists at BeyondAutism in order for the pupil to be assessed for a high-tech device by an outside agency.

Communication environment

The environment within BeyondAutism follow a Total Communication approach. This includes use of visual information throughout the school to support understanding. Visual information consists of symbols, signs and photographs. Visual timetables are used within the classroom environment to support group and individual understanding as appropriate.

Staff training

All staff will receive internal training from the Therapies team to ensure their practice remains current and that they have the skills and knowledge to successfully support students to use their preferred method of communication. Regular training and support will be delivered and updated in any relevant areas including but not limited to:

- PECS
- Makaton
- Use of symbol software (Communicate in Print)
- VOCAs

The Speech and Language Therapists, and Occupational Therapists where appropriate, will ensure they are maintaining their knowledge and skills of AAC through attendance at relevant external training, participation in professional clinical networks and by review of current EBP (Evidence Based Practice) and research in line with their own professional standards.

If a member of staff feels they need more support when working with learners using AAC, they should contact their SaLT as soon as possible.

Date of last review: May 2023

Date of next review: May 2024

Review group: Executive Head