

## Helping Our Kids Say it with Symbols!

### Four Simple Steps for Summer Fun with AAC

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We've all heard the expression "it's the journey, not the destination." This has never been truer than in the quest for a child's competence with augmentative communication (AAC) systems. Every skill a child learns is a building block for the next, and if we take the steps to ensure a meaningful and productive journey, the destination is all the sweeter.

Summer is a wonderful time to provide language-rich activities. Day trips and vacations are full of opportunities to teach new vocabulary and concepts in a structured manner while still allowing time for exploration of the device and plenty of practice. With these four simple steps you'll be on your way to a summer of fun and ever closer to your communication destination.

**Step 1: Know your destination.** *If you don't know where you are going, it's hard to get there!*

In other words, make sure you know exactly what you want to teach. Of course, some incidental teaching and exploration can and will happen as well, but have a good sense of the overall vocabulary, grammatical structures (i.e., phrases, sentences, verb tenses) and communicative functions (i.e., greetings, comments, questions) you want to focus on.

The goals you choose will be different for each child based on their skill level. For one child, the goal might be simply naming the animals, while for another it might be describing the animals with attributes of color and size. Some children might practice combining two words to start putting together simple phrases such as "lion eat" or "big monkey," while others may be working toward complete sentences such as "I see a big monkey" or "the lion is eating." The same child might be able to construct phrases or whole sentences with familiar vocabulary and sentence structure, but with new vocabulary you might target single words before using them within a sentence. Again, the goal will depend on the individual's skill level with the necessary vocabulary to construct such phrases and sentences. If you are unsure of what vocabulary, grammatical structures, or communicative functions to focus on, ask your child's speech and language pathologist for suggestions.

**Step 2: Set your course.** *If you don't prepare for the journey you can be sure you will make wrong turns resulting in frustration.*

Prepare yourself to teach the intended vocabulary. This will require a little work and time on your part with the device, software, device consultant or speech and language pathologist, to learn what you need to make sure the journey goes as smoothly as possible.

When preparing vocabulary, be sure to pick a variety of words: some verbs, adjectives, question words, and nouns. You will be surprised how useful they will all be once you reach your destination. I like to pick as many high frequency words as possible which can be used across many activities and can be used individually or in combination. By picking these common, reusable words you won't have to prepare as much for the next activity. A few sample sentences and phrases that work well in all contexts are:

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I (don't) like that, Help, Stop, What is that?, I see a.... , It is....

### **Step 3:** Let the good times roll. *If it ain't fun, it ain't worth doin'!*

Now that you are ready for the activity, have some fun with it. Use the vocabulary to play games like I Spy (substitute "see" for a more frequently occurring word) or to answer riddles. Play the alphabet game on long trips if one of your goals is to identify letters, or to see how many license plates you can identify. It's okay if the answers are incorrect or don't make sense, just be sure to respond appropriately and give good feedback for a more appropriate answer. You might need to model which buttons to select on the device to show the user what to do. Just be aware which target words to model and how much help to give.

### **Step 4:** Recap: *Ahhh....the memories!*

Reflecting on your journey is a very important step in the learning process. It helps to tie everything together and allows for carryover of vocabulary into other activities such as journaling and storytelling. You might want to bring a digital camera along and take pictures to help your child recall what they saw and did during the activity. Also, using digital pictures during an activity can give your child more time to process an event that happened too quickly for them, allowing the extra time to find the words they need.

Now that you have started on your journey, remember to keep it moving by adding new goals to preexisting ones as often as needed to keep it fresh and exciting. It's a long journey, but then again.....that's what it's all about!

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