

# Chatting with an AAC(Augmentative/Alternative Communication Device)

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**Abstract.** Communicating with someone using an electronic communication device is different from routine conversation. Despite enormous technological progress, talking with a person with a disability using an electronic communicator is an acquired skill. Very few people in the general population and few professionals know how to chat with someone using an assistive device. Experience a conversation now so you will not have to avoid it when you need to talk to someone who communicates with a device. Let's overcome the fear of talking with someone who uses an AAC device to facilitate communication.

**Keywords:** Augmentative/Alternative Communication(AAC), Assistive Technology, Down's syndrome, mental retardation, electronic conversation, Picture Communication Symbols(PCS), speech therapy, ChatPC, conversational dynamics, volunteers.

The notion that chatting with an AAC device is different than chatting without one is a challenge to be overcome. Today, you can help by participating in this session to do just that. Someday, people will find it natural to speak with someone who uses assistive technology.

Hello, my name is Ron Kuebler and I am a speech pathologist and operate a private speech therapy practice called Lingual Perfection. Scott and I have a mission to help a person feel comfortable when they talk to someone who uses an assistive technology device. I would like to introduce you to Scott Kuebler, my son, and the person you will be talking with today. Scott is using a ChatPC by Dave Hershberger and Saltillo Corporation and it is, basically, a Personal Desk Assistant(PDA) with an external amplifier. It uses software incorporating Picture Communication Symbols(PCS) by Mayer-Johnson and digital images and text with synthetic voicing. Let's hear from Scott.

Hello, my name is Scott Kuebler(pictured)... Scott uses the ChatPC to report on his personal details. He will also talk about his employment and travel experiences in promoting speech with assistive technology. Scott is a 26 year old man with Down's syndrome and uses the ChatPC to clarify what he says. His use of Augmentative/Alternative Communication(AAC) devices goes back to 1996 when was 16 years old and he used the Pegasus Lite by Words+. He has an expressive/receptive language disorder secondary to Down's syndrome and has received speech therapy since he

was a young boy. Before using electronic devices, he used manual communication boards with marginal success.

Scott Kuebler lives at home with his parents, Ron and Margot Kuebler and works at the BiLo grocery store for a few hours each week as a bagger. It is within one mile(1.6 kilometers) and he walks back and forth to work. Scott has been a member of the Boy Scouts of America for many years as a boy and as an adult leader and is an Eagle Scout, the highest rank in scouting. Scott also earned the Gold Congressional Award in 2000 and promotes this program around the world as the International Award and by other names. Scott has two brothers, Gregory(24) and Matthew(22) Kuebler, who live in other parts of the United States of America.

How many people have engaged in conversation with someone using an assistive technology device is unknown to the authors. However, in the experience of presenting to individuals involved in the field of AAC, the numbers are surprisingly small. When the general public is requested to indicate experience, the results observed by the authors is dismally small.

Conversational dynamics are considerably different when one of the communication partners uses an AAC device. The major issue is the fact that most people do not know what the communication device does or how it is accomplished. Being empathic certainly helps as most AAC users or their caregivers are able to provide guidance as to how a conversation should go.

A general conversation may have different dynamics depending on the cultural and linguistic environment. This presentation introduces a Standard English context, although the authors are interested in hearing about variations presented by audience members. Certainly the comparison of general conversation with and without an AAC device is affected by the cultural and linguistic parameters.

Dialectic variations certainly cause confusion in a conversation when listeners are unfamiliar with the words or phrases. For example, an American from the South of the United States immediately knows what you mean when you say, "ya'll". It means that a person is addressing everyone within listening distance and could be one or more people. Rate of presentation of a thought is affected when using an AAC device because the process time is extended. Rate of reception may be extended as well for the transmitter as well as the receiver. Intelligibility is affected by the use of picture and digital images to transmit a thought. Person listening and seeing something transmitted by an AAC user may ask for increased repetitions to clarify the item. An AAC user may have increased repetition requests as well, especially if the non-AAC user is not empathic to the user's method of communication. When we speak, we can control our loudness spontaneously, but an AAC user may need to turn dials to adjust volume for the situation and noise level. Some individuals may have difficulty interpreting symbols used by the AAC user. The time to formulate a thought when using an AAC device is extended and dependent on the competence of the individual to access information and to transmit it. What other factors can anyone think of?

A structured conversation will be developed during the presentation to give audience members an increased understanding of what they might want to say and ask in a volunteer conversation. This also highlights the methods that can be used to negotiate the actual conversation. Facial expression can tell either communication partner how comfortable each is with a conversation. Body language also indicates a measure of comfort during an augmented conversation. Sometimes people will change the tone

and other features of their voice when speaking to someone using an AAC device. Beginning and ending a conversation may consist of similar words when comparing an augmented and non-augmented conversation. One extra step is working through the device to send and receive the message.

Volunteers will be asked to engage Scott in a conversation and the audience will be given opportunity after the conversation to make comments and suggestions. Subsequent conversationalists may benefit from their predecessors as to the dynamics of the subsequent conversations.

The importance of talking about the conversations has immediate and long range effects. Audience members will be challenged to take their new or improved skills back to the community in which they live and engage people who use AAC. The other expectation would be to share the experience with other individuals who would like to learn how to communicate with someone who uses assistive technology.

Advances in the area of AAC technology will continue in miniaturization of devices, scope of control by one device, communication prediction or completion, and speed tasks are carried out. Unfortunately, the rate of assimilation of advanced techniques by users will probably lag behind due to the lack of coordinated teaching of AAC use to users and their mentors. A long range plan is needed to counter this ongoing trend.

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