# Supporting students with complex communication needs

All students need to be able to communicate effectively to learn and engage in education, participate in school activities, and transition into the workforce.

Communication is constant. Being able to communicate effectively helps us to interact with others, participate in society, and enact our human rights.

## What are complex communication needs?

People who have complex communication needs do not have the spoken communication skills to meet all of their needs, and experience limitations or restrictions participating independently in society as a result.[1]

Students with complex communication needs may require support to communicate effectively, understand what is being communicated, express themselves, and interact with others. They may not be able to speak, or not speak effectively.

Adding to (augmenting) speech or using alternative ways to communicate can assist people with complex communication needs to understand, express themselves, and be understood by others.

## What is AAC?

Alternative and augmentative communication (AAC) is a range of strategies and tools to help people communicate as effectively as possible, and in as many situations as possible, by supplementing or replacing speech.

AAC may include a person using their body (e.g. signing, facial expression, eye gaze) or an aid (e.g. picture symbols, Braille, speech-generating device, communication board).

A person uses multiple methods or systems of AAC to allow them to use the method that suits, best based on context, audience, and intention. For example, a person may use a communication board and key word signs while swimming, instead of their electronic speech generating device.

Having multiple, appropriate AAC methods supports each student with complex communication needs to access and participate in schooling on the same basis as other students.

While developing competence in AAC, users need people to model their methods of communicating to them to support the development of both their receptive and expressive communication skills.

AAC facilitates access to the curriculum and fosters social networks.

Students need more than one way of communicating (multi-modal communication) to ensure they are able to communicate in all environments and activities. For example, in the classroom, in the playground with their peers, at sport, on the way to and from school.

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# Important partnerships

Students with complex communication needs are best supported using a team approach. The student is an important member of the decision making team.

Being a member of a community of supportive people who are prepared to use, model, scaffold, value that communication method, and assume that the individual can be a competent communicator, will assist the student to acquire language and competence using a communication system.

# Parents, carers and families

The *Disability Standards for Education 2005* (Cwth) require that school staff consult with the student and their associates (for most students, this means their parents or carers) when planning, and providing reasonable adjustments.

> The student, parents, families and people who know the student well will have suggestions about how you can best understand and communicate with each other.

# Professionals

Collaboration between school staff, the student, their parent/carer, and other specialist staff is important for developing a shared understanding of the student's needs, and how best to support them.

Specialist staff, such as speech language pathologists, can assist school staff to:

- understand the purpose and application of AAC systems to meet individual needs
- identify and implement learning strategies associated with the AAC
- build confidence and competence in using and modelling the student's AAC systems.

Speech language pathologists are key members of the team. Occupational therapists or physiotherapists may also be members of the team, along with the student, student's family, class teacher, Head of Curriculum, Head of Special Education Services, Deputy Principal, and other relevant personnel.

# Communication partners

A communication partner is anyone who talks or interacts with another person. All people can be communication partners.

Students need a range of communication partners in the school community. This includes staff, other students and people they are involved in activities with.

Communicating with a range of people supports students with complex communication needs to:

- express their ideas, feelings, needs, and wants
- understand other people
- develop a range of reliable and independent ways of communicating
- connect to others and be safe.

Consider:

- who will communicate with the student
- providing training for communication partners
- how communication using the student's AAC will be modelled throughout the day, in all school activities
- what adjustments are required throughout the school day to support the student to communicate and improve their communication skills
- whether the student needs additional ways of communicating to participate in school activities.

Communication partners are vital for supporting the student to communicate well. School teams should consider the training needs of people who will be communication partners for students with complex communication needs – including peers and school staff.

# Collectively supporting communication

Students with complex communication needs may require explicit, deliberate, systematic, and highly-structured intervention to achieve their communication goals. They also require incidental opportunities to build their communication skills and confidence communicating, as would happen through social interaction.

## Whole school approach

A whole school approach ensures a cohesive response to diverse learning needs.

Using AAC effectively requires schools to take account of the student's methods of communication when planning, enacting, and assessing the curriculum. Principals should ensure school resourcing is used to support AAC to be implemented.

Planning and programming should encompass all school activities and environments within the school to ensure students with complex communication needs are included, and can effectively use and practise with their AAC to communicate with the people who are also involved in those activities.

Consider:

- the diverse ways and reasons all students communicate
- both expressive and receptive (understanding) modes of communication
- if the school's whole curriculum plan addresses the needs of all students requiring AAC
- asking a speech language pathologist to provide advice and support to the school community
- if the communication modes used in teaching, learning, and assessment are consistent
- if required technological supports and processes are in place
- ensuring evidence-based communication modes are implemented throughout students' schooling
- how the development and use of effective means of communication for students, and the whole curriculum plan will be regularly monitored to ensure they reflect the students attending the school.

## Supporting an individual's communication

Students with complex communication needs may require individual planning to ensure their methods of communication are used consistently across all curriculum areas, school environments, home, and community activities.

Consider:

- whether there needs to be a specific communication plan, or documentation through other plans that the school uses to support individual students
- the student's methods of communication across settings, identifying one method that meets most of their needs to become a primary (but not exclusive) method of communication
- forming a multidisciplinary team to develop and deliver the support for the communication goals documented on the student's support plan
- information, ideas, and opinions from people involved, such as the student, their parent/carer, and service providers
- the need for peer support and/or mentoring, where available, to ensure access to appropriate role models, and to support developing student identity within specific communities such as blind, Deaf, deafblind, or AAC users.

# Communication accessible curriculum

All students are entitled to access the curriculum. A comprehensive AAC system facilitates this.

Specific planning is required for students who use AAC to access and participate in the curriculum. Planning should encompass:

- any adjustments to support the student to access the curriculum and participate in learning activities that are required
- adjustments that may be required to the quantity, mode, or complexity of information
- preparing to enact the curriculum, for example, by providing access to appropriate vocabulary and grammatical constructions
- what means of response or interaction students using AAC will use in all learning experiences
- how to assess what the student has learnt
- reporting considerations.

With effective teaching, practice, and useful feedback, all students can develop further knowledge, skills, and the understanding to apply these purposefully to challenging tasks.

# Supporting positive behaviour

Students should be supported using a range of proactive strategies, including communication supports.

There is a link between communication difficulties and behaviour difficulties.[1] For people with complex communication needs, not having access to an effective communication system can be frustrating. This frustration sometimes results in behaviours of concern.[3] For some students, behaviours such as withdrawal, refusal, aggression, self-injury, and property destruction may serve a communicative function, as they do not have the 'voice' to communicate their needs in an appropriate manner.

Interventions aimed at increasing communication alternatives can be an essential component of improving a student's access and participation in school life.

A functional behaviour assessment (FBA) should be completed if students with complex communication needs are exhibiting behaviours of concern. The FBA process will collect information regarding the occurrence and maintenance of problem behaviour, and serve as a basis for developing proactive and comprehensive behaviour support strategies.

As part of the FBA, a Functional Communication Training (FCT) assessment may be completed to identify the function of the behaviour. FCT is an approach designed for children with developmental disability and autism spectrum disorder. It is used identify the purpose of a behaviour, and to teach an easier, more appropriate way of communicating the same thing.[4]

> **Never restrict a person's access to their communication system,** as this is a form of discrimination and may violate their human rights.

## Providing child safe environments for students with complex communication needs

Being able to communicate independently is important for reducing the risk of abuse, assault or neglect.[3]

Facilitated communication (also known as supported typing or rapid prompting) is not an appropriate means of supporting students with complex communication needs. Facilitated communication does not enable people to communicate their own messages, and causes them to be vulnerable to undue influence, manipulation, and exploitation.[1]

Speech language pathologists can support the student and the school team to determine what AAC and access methods are best suited to support independent communication.[1]

School teams will need to implement a range of strategies to ensure that students with complex communication needs are supported, and feel safe at school. The National Principles for Child Safe Organisations can guide this work.

## Knowledge and capability to support communication

Schools should select, implement and monitor an array of communication methods that are evidence-based. This assists students with complex communication needs to maximise their academic and social development.

Principals will need to identify, and provide opportunities for staff to access, relevant professional learning.

Staff can be supported in a range of ways, through performance and development processes, to develop their skills, knowledge, and confidence so they can:

- provide an appropriate education program for students with complex communication needs
- embed communication strategies in day-to-day school life, curriculum delivery, assessment, and school activities and events
- model students' AAC methods.

> Staff capability is essential for supporting students with complex communication needs, and differentiating the curriculum so that all students can participate in learning experiences, showing what they understand.

## Helpful links

- Speech Pathology Australia: Speech Pathology in Schools
- Complex communication needs booklet
- Disability Standards for Education e-learning
- Speak up and be safe from abuse communication toolkit and resources

## References

1. Speech Pathology Australia (2012). Augmentative and Alternative Communication Clinical Guideline. Melbourne: Speech Pathology Australia.
2. Sigafoos, J., Arthur-Kelly, M. & Butterfield, N. (2006). Enhancing Everyday Communication for Children with Disabilities. Paul H Brookes, Baltimore.
3. The State of Queensland (Department of Communities, Disability Services and Seniors) 2018. Complex communication needs. Available from: https://www.qld.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0022/58540/complex-communication-needs.pdf
4. Raising Children Network (Australia) Limited. (2006-2020). Functional Communication Training (FCT). Available from: https://raisingchildren.net.au/autism/therapies-guide/fct

# School checklist

## Supporting students with complex communication needs

The following checklist may assist schools in developing whole school and individual processes to address the needs of students with complex communication needs.

If responding *no* to any of the following items, plan to facilitate the action.

| Partnership | ✓/✗ |
|---|---|
| The school has requested support from a speech language pathologist to identify, plan for, and implement supports for students with complex communication needs | |
| A multidisciplinary team supports teachers to develop, implement, and review plans for individual students and the whole school | |
| The process for selecting communication methods and supports for students are based on evidence, and consider family and student choice | |
| Collaboration is occurring between internal and external stakeholders, with the student and their family at the centre | |
| **Knowledge and capability to support communication** | |
| The school's whole curriculum plan reflects the characteristics and methods of communication used by all students attending the school, and the school's plan for improvement | |
| Staff are aware of how to implement the whole curriculum plan to support students with CCN | |
| Staff professional development needs have been identified and planned for to ensure individual students are supported across all school environments and activities | |
| Information about students' communication needs, supports, and resources are clearly communicated between staff (including relief staff), so that students receive high-quality support in all activities, and year to year | |
| **Collectively supporting communication** | |
| All students are able to communicate in more than one way | |
| Students' communication methods enable them to communicate now, and allow for their continued learning and development of communication skills | |
| Supports and systems are embedded to enable students to communicate with all their key communication partners (e.g. peers, staff, volunteers) | |
| Regular reviews of students' communication needs, supports, and plans are completed | |
| Students can and have the opportunity to interact with their peers | |
| **Communication accessible curriculum** | |
| Students' communication methods enable them to engage with the curriculum, participate in school activities, and show what they know and understand | |