It is well known that communication is the key to a healthy relationship. It represents an essential skill worth learning that helps us to develop and maintain all of our relationships. Teens just want to have friends. Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) users just want to be teens. They all just want connections regardless of disabilities. What does "relationships" really mean for AAC users? For AAC users, it means navigating social experiences on top of navigating the complexities of a communication system. Being part of an inclusive, collaborative community as an active and contributing member is a challenge many with complex communication needs can struggle to achieve. Feelings of isolation or which contribute to "physical and mental health issues" have been described by many AAC users including adult users (Cooper et al. 2009; Hamm and Miranda, 2006). How can we support our AAC users. How can we support building friendships and reduce isolation for complex communicators?

According to ASHA it is "imperative that the goal of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) use be the most effective interactive communication possible. Anything less represents a compromise of the individual's human potential" (ASHA, 2021).

Historically, there has been a lack of understanding of AAC by professionals (seeing AAC as a full, robust language) resulting from multiple changes in their language. This is complicated by communication partners and limited connections with others. This in conjunction with the complexity of many of these students' significant health conditions which further limit their social environments, thus creating the perfect storm for a lack of social interactions. Many parents of AAC users have indicated that their student no longer had connection with the world outside their home while others have indicated that this world of isolation had already been their norm due to their students' individual health concerns. Simultaneously, lack of access to authentic reasons to communicate often result in caretakers or professionals changing or limiting vocabulary rather than expanding opportunity and increasing communication competencies (Light and McNaughton, 2014). These changes and limitations lead to inadvertently reducing access to language, lack of exposure to natural language opportunities, reduction in available communication functions, a lack of joyful interactions outside of the family, lack of community identity, and a general lack of expectations. How can students who do not attend school in person not develop connections, but maintain or increase their access to language?

AAC Explorers Designed to Assist in Building Social Relationships

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Adult volunteers from throughout Central California, i.e., Speech Language Pathology Special Education MEd/Master/Severe Education or Assisitance Technology and Alternative Communication, utilized a language stimulation approach, engaging and interesting activities to promote AAC use and building of distance friendships. Every adult volunteer facilitator had a designated role for supporting the session. Roles included: graphic designer, host to create social rooms, activity leader for with breakroom, assistant activity leader, photographer, whole group activity leader. AAC Design was inspired by AACA Academy (Austin, 2021, 202, and 2027) but with differences in delivery, group sizes and needs. Facilitators used guided, teen-centered activities which allowed AAC users to explore activities and connect with other teens who share a similar identity. Through social and creative (everyday teen) activities, different skills were enhanced.

Time | Roles | Responsibilities
--- | --- | ---
--- | Coach, set up & design | Create PowerWall/Line Up rooms in Breakroom
--- | Moderator | Check in
--- | Room Leader | Host group, lead group activities
--- | Room Leader | Roster students for rooms, start group activities
--- | Room Leader | Introduce break out theme groups
--- | Room Leader | Stamp out misbehaving
--- | Room Leader | Room language functions (not just reading/writing, questions, direct, indirect, question, describe, print, etc.)
--- | Room Leader | NOT Yelling
--- | Room Leader | Add sticker to breakout rooms
--- | Room Leader | Add points from the break out rooms
--- | Room Leader | End with closing social
--- | Room Leader | Create PowerWall around for theme of "interaction"

AAC Explorers Start Their Journey

- 12 AAC users: ages 13-20 from 8 districts throughout Central California
- Includes Music, Jokes, Competitions

Adults included a range of ages: 13-20 years old. They were AAC users from the Central California Region. These adults had language delays, language disorders, intellectual delays, autism spectrum disorder, cerebral palsy, quadriplegic, and refractory epilepsy. They all share a similar identity: They are teenagers ages 13-20. As the AAC Explorers group takes different forms of social groupings, families, friends, and AAC users developed new connections and self-advocacy. AAC Explorers provided a means of effective communication to individuals with complex communication needs. Analysis of an effectiveness survey, compiled by the AAC Explorers indicated: AAC Explorers felt heard, were able to state their feelings and opinions, and were inspired and motivated to talk to other AAC users.

- Activities were meaningful, relevant, engaging and motivating.
- AAC Explorers had a higher focus in "week" job activities, Games, Poetry and Shout Out.

AAC Explorers formed in October of 2020 to build social experiences for AAC users and their communication partners with a focus on expanding their social networks (Blackstone, 2012) and to increase effectiveness of interactions. AAC Explorers created a safe environment to share communication. Students participated for two hours a month across eight months demonstrating an increase in communication skills: social language, interaction, interaction, repair strategies, range of partners and communication functions. Each AAC Explorers' social experience is different and dependent upon communication skill/partners and an overall focus on building self-confidence and social interactions. DOUGLAC users expressed feelings of being alone and being ignored gradually, as the group design created a supportive and safe environment for personal reflection. Their development of self-determination and self-advocacy was evident when several Explorers stated, “Friendship is not being alone” and that they need to be listened to. AAC Explorers supported building social experiences within an inclusive environment where AAC Language was a focus, allowing all forms of communication. Not all students will or have to return to an in-person learning environment, but through the platform of AAC Explorers, they can access a teenage community regardless of their future educational situations. In the AAC Explorers social environment, families stepped back as their child’s independence, social communication, and advocacy skills increased. One family summed it up best “I changed my daughter’s life and gave her access to the world.”

AAC Explorers: Building Social Experiences for AAC Users

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Conclusions


References

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Focus on core words

Closing Group
Data analysis comparison (Source: Realize Language)

Conclusions

- One time a month virtual social gathering for two hours
- Design and pace activity for student engagement
- AAC Explorers program resulted in increased confidence, independence, and communication skills
- AAC Explorers supported building social experiences within an inclusive environment where AAC Language was a focus, allowing all forms of communication
- Not all students will or have to return to an in-person learning environment, but through the platform of AAC Explorers, they can access a teenage community regardless of their future educational situations
- In the AAC Explorers social environment, families stepped back as their child’s independence, social communication, and advocacy skills increased
- One family summed it up best “I changed my daughter’s life and gave her access to the world.”