

Considerations for Implementing a Mobile AAC Device

After your IEP team has determined that using a mobile device is appropriate for the student, there are other important considerations. While this list doesn't exhaust every scenario to focus on, it may help provide some general guidelines.

1) How to protect the device?

While most mobile devices are more durable than you would think, it is recommended that you consider which protective case may provide the best combination of portability and security. If the student is prone to excessive moisture, or enjoys water a little too much ☺, there are also waterproof cases that may assist. While there are cases that can handle any level of abuse, these may also compromise the students' ability to use them independently (including allowing the student to carry device at all times). Trying to find a balance of protection and portability appears to be critical.

2) Portability

While larger tablet devices (e.g., Apple iPad) are certainly attractive and multi-faceted, they may not necessarily be the ideal choice for communication. Obviously the student's fine motor and visual skills factor in, but the team may strongly wish to consider smaller, more portable devices for communication (e.g., Apple iPod touch). As the goal of many picture exchange curriculums involves traveling components, having a smaller device is often the most preferred option. This also is an important consideration for students who participate in community-based instruction.

3) How much access does the student have to the device?

This is obviously a team decision; however, there are many supporters of the notion that these device are a "student's voice." As such, there may be some support for the student to have the device at all times (Please note, that we recognize that each student has different needs, so there may certainly be other scenarios where it is not appropriate for the student to have it at all times). To assist, there are a number of accessories that can aid the process. Many students within OCDE and Touch2Learn have a waist pack that holds the device. This approach has been highly successful. In addition, the team could consider a case that is ultimately attached to a key extender, which in turn is attached to the student's belt loop.

Ultimately the question arises, "What if the student keeps taking it out of the waist pack and making requests?" This is obviously the short-term goal for many students even if it conflicts with the typical instructional flow of the class. As the student makes gains in understanding the process of communication, the team will obviously be faced with times where they say, "This is not available."

There also may be a tendency for students to engage in stimulatory behaviors with the device. This is a very real possibility depending on the students needs. With that said, we feel that this is a teaching opportunity with a critical focus on assisting the student in structuring his or her day/items. As this is often a core deficit for students with autism (as well as other special needs populations), this becomes a very important and relevant instructional concept. Many students with ASD and other disabilities will require support in structuring the use of these devices. Rather than seeing this as a deterrent for using the device, this may become a positive goal with important long-term implications for the student.

4) What do I teach?

While our program has been using these devices since 2007, we have long had specific curriculums that identify the steps to teach the process of communication. Historically, we have used “paper based” photos (icons, etc.) within this process and now there are many students who simply use a mobile device. The curriculum and process however, remains consistent with these traditional approaches. We feel that in order to teach communication with these devices, the team should have a clear focus and sequence (with likely attached goals and objectives).

5) “Do we start with communication or do we teach how to operate the device?”

For many students with autism and other disabilities, operating the device, such as swiping and turning it on, may be consistent with their profile of cognitive strengths. When it does not come as naturally to the student, it may be wise to engage in various activities to enhance their ability to use their fine motor skills with various applications. With that said, the team must first consider the overall rigidity of the student. Many students with special needs (especially students with ASD) may become fixated with an application and be frustrated when then asked to use the device for communication. The student may continue to focus on the other applications and be resistant to using the device for other purposes.

The notion of rigidity is an extremely important consideration prior to implementing the device. Some students may be considerably more flexible where you can remove the previous application (or “hide” it...i.e., moving it several pages over so that it is not in direct view when the student first turns on the device).

Within our program, the notion of displaying this flexibility again becomes an important teaching focus. As a student is successful in communicating wants and needs with the device, many of our students then express personal information (i.e., name, address, phone number, etc). In addition, many OCDE students gradually evolve into also using it for leisure and other scholastic purposes. We have seen many students with ASD make this transition; however, it is important to consider the path that you want to take when first introducing the content.

6) Device Setup

When preparing the device for the initial setup, we strongly advocate for the parental controls to be activated. On Apple iOS devices this can be found under “General” and then under “Restrictions” within the Settings application. When enabling these restrictions, there are several, immensely valuable changes that can be made to the device. Here is how we recommend that the devices be set up:

Safari – Off

YouTube – Off

Camera – Depends

FaceTime – Off

iTunes – Off

Ping – Off

Installing Apps – Off

Deleting Apps* - Off

In App Purchases – Off

Ratings for – United States

Music and Podcasts – Clean (select off which turns “Clean” on)

Movies – Depends – some say “Don’t allow Movies” some say “G”

TV Shows – Depends – some say “Don’t allow TV Shows” some say “TV-Y”

Apps – 4+ (although some programs may want to consider other settings)

*Very Important

As many of our students begin by only using a small number of applications, these items are placed at the bottom for immediate access (when an item is placed on the bottom row, they can be accessed from any page). In addition, all additional apps are placed on other pages. The goal is ultimately to have only one or two applications on a page and gradually increase the number of “apps” on the page (based on student toleration).