**Guidelines for Communicating**

**and Using the Symbol Book**

Before you begin a conversation or interview with a victim of abuse, sexual abuse, neglect or exploitation and who uses AAC to communicate, please read through these guidelines and become familiar with the symbols in this book.

**Who, What, Where, When**

In our everyday life we conduct interviews with people we encounter. We call these “interviews” conversations. When we meet someone for the first time, we may find out the person’s name, what the person does for work, where the person lives and other relevant information. When victims are interviewed after abuse, sexual abuse, neglect or exploitation, investigators, law enforcement or disability workers, and victim advocates frequently use the same plan for getting information:

* What happened?
* Who perpetrated the abuse?
* How did it happen?
* When did it occur?
* Where did it occur?
* Who saw, heard or overheard the alleged incident?

This is one way to frame our conversations and questions with victims and gives us a blueprint for thinking about symbols. “How” and “What” frequently overlap, so for purposes of this symbol book, these concepts have been combined. In addition, it is important to recognize that some people do not understand ‘how’ questions so it is preferred to use ‘what’ questions.

It is important to remember that following trauma, many victims (with or without disabilities) may have difficulty communicating their experiences. Many victims are more likely to be able to share their account of what happened by recalling sensory memories rather than a chronological, who, what, where, when approach. Asking questions about what did you see, what did you smell, what did you feel, tell me about any parts of your body that were uncomfortable or hurt, may be easier to recall. For more information on Forensic Experiential Trauma Interviewing (FETI) see <http://www.evawintl.org> or <http://www.bwjp.org>.

**Features of the Symbol Book**

* The sections “Who, What, Where, When” have tabs for ease of reference.
* There is an index at the end of the book listing all of the symbols used and where they are located.
* The symbols which come under “alphabet,” “numbers,” “colors,” and “shapes” are grouped under those headings.
* The pages are laminated and should be removed from the binder as needed rather than presented all at once.
* The plain laminated pages at the end with cut out sections can be placed over a symbol page to show one symbol at a time. This may avoid visual distraction and possible confusion. This can also be used to confirm what symbol the individual pointed to.
* The “When” section features holidays and weather conditions. Time is an abstract concept for some individuals who have cognitive disabilities. A victim’s report may be viewed as unreliable because they do not have the ability to understand and/or convey time in a conventional way. Interviewers may be able to approximate time by asking the victim if it was dark/light outside, sunny/raining, before/after their birthday, the day they go to work/visits/parents, etc.

**Before Communicating with the AAC User**

* You don't need special skills to communicate with an individual who uses an augmentative or alternative communication system.
* Knowing an individual’s IQ will be of minimal value in learning how to communicate with them.Describing an individual’s level of functioning, e.g. “like a three year old”, does not account for life experience and is not useful in communication.
* An individual who cannot speak can still communicate in other ways.
* For people with cognitive disabilities, “where, what, who” concepts are most basic to understand. “How” is more complex. “When” is difficult if we rely on clocks and calendars, but many people can connect “when” to activities, their schedule and concrete concepts such as light and dark.
* Emotions may be difficult for people with cognitive disabilities to express if they are not actually experiencing the emotion at that moment or if they have not been trained to identify and express their emotions.
* Everyone communicates in some way, including through behavior and body language. Pay attention to facial expressions, body language, gestures, etc.
* Spend time talking informally and observing the person to get an idea of how they communicateand their level of understanding.
* Ask the person the best way to communicate and have them show/tell you.
* Ask if the individual if they can read and if they would be willing to read for you. Assure the person it is ok if they cannot read.
* If necessary, ask the person using AAC if you can see another person communicating with them. [4](#_bookmark0)

4 Speak Up Sexual Health and Safeguarding Communication Displays, December, 2004. Retrieved April 10, 2006 from <http://www.aacsafeguarding.ca/vocabulary-using_com_disp.htm#1>

**Using a Helper for Communication**

Many people who use AAC may want or need someone to help them communicate effectively. A communication helper supports the person by knowing how they communicate. The helper knows what the AAC user needs for communication. The helper should be someone with whom the individual feels comfortable, who knows their communication well, and a person they choose.

* Find out if the AAC user is connected to a social service agency or has a friend, advocate, or other person whom they trust.
* If the individual agrees, use this person to assist you with communicating and/or provide you with information.
* It is preferable not to use family members or legal guardians (many adults with disabilities have legal guardians) or others who, may have a vested interest in the outcome or the person may feel uncomfortable relating sensitive details about abuse, neglect or exploitation in front of them. People who live with them or know them well commit some of the crimes against people with disabilities.
* Discuss the role the helper will have ahead of time and the types of questions you will be asking.
* Always talk directly to the person who needs assistance, not about them or solely to the helper.
* Observe the victim’s reactions to the helper, watchbody language for signs of discomfort or power and control over her. If you observe any of these, check with the woman privately to see if she wishes to continue with assistance from the helper.

**Supporting AAC Users in Learning Symbols**

Although some people who have communicative disorders will be trained in the use of symbols or have symbol books of their own, some will not. Use different strategies to determine the type of support an individual might need when learning/using the symbols in the book.

* Discuss the concept of the symbol and what it means. Talk about how the picture represents the object or concept. Some individuals will understand the concept and will need to know how the picture represents it. Others will not know the meaning of the word or concept and will need you to describe in detail what it means. E.g. “Running is when a person is moving very fast, like this.” (demonstrate) Or “This picture means ‘run.’ This is a picture of someone running. Point to this picture if you want to tell me about someone running.”
* Ascertain if the person recognizes a picture given its component parts. Give the individual the word and a description of how it is represented.

E.g. ask her to find the item that communicates the word or concept for “Touch.” Tell them that it shows a person’s hand touching something. If the person has difficulty, spend more time discussing why the picture represents this item.

* Determine if the individual recognizes a picture given its verbal label. E.g. ask the person to find the item for “sexual assault” by just saying the

words. If the person has difficulty, find out if they understand~~s~~ the meaning of the spoken word and/or if they need more time reviewing how it is represented in the picture.

* Discover if the individual understands the meaning of the symbol.

Ask the person to locate a symbol when you give the meaning of an item. E.g. ask the person to find the one that goes on a penis for safer sex. If the individual has difficulty, find out if they understand the function or meaning of the item and /or if they need~~s~~ more time reviewing how the item is represented in the picture.

* Ask the person to use the items when you give a specific context.

E.g. ask them how they could tell someone to use a condom. [5](#_bookmark1)

**Getting Started with the Conversation**

* Communicate in a neutral, quiet, private place that is free of distractions.
* Talk directly with the person at eye level.
* Be clear about why you are asking questions. Explain your role e.g., “I’m a person who helps people after things have happened to them they do not like.”
* Frequently assure the individual that they did nothing wrong and that it is OK if they can’t remember everything.
* Ask questions at the person’s ability to comprehend.
* Be courteous and respectful. Do not condescend.
* Speak at a normal volume unless the person is hard of hearing.
* Speak simply. Be concrete. Avoid technical terms or idioms. Avoid sarcasm.
* Don’t overload the person with too much information. Explain one idea at a time. Ask one question at a time.
* Give the individual time to process information and respond. Using AAC takes more time than speaking and it takes time to construct a message.
* Be patient. Feel comfortable with the silences.
* Allow the individual to initiate their own messages.
* If possible, ask open-ended questions. Avoid multiple choice questions.
* Use neutral verbal bridges such as “I see. What happened next?”
* Try repeating the last phrase the person said e.g., “He pushed you down?”
* Be repetitious. Ask question in a different way. Give examples.
* If the person isn’t directly answering the question, say, “That’s interesting. What does that have to do with...?” [6](#_bookmark2)

5 Ibid

**Using the Symbol Book**

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* Spread the “communication aids” pages 14 and 15 in front of the person on a table or other surface where she can see and touch them.
* Have the individual show you their symbol or way for answering “yes” or “no” questions.
* If the person is able to and wishes to spell, use page 16 with letters as well.
* On the communication pages, point to each symbol and read it to the person. Periodically remind them what these communication symbols mean if they don’t spontaneously use them.
* Tell the individual about the different sections (who, what, where, when) of the symbol book and what they mean, e.g. “This is the section that has pictures of people.” Refer to the different sections when you are using various pages so she knows where to find certain symbols.
* With the individual, select a page or topic, e.g., “First, do you want to talk about what happened to you or where it happened?”
* Turn to the page the person has selected.
* To view one symbol at a time, use a laminated page with a cutout to cover the other symbols on the page. Some people will prefer to look at the page so they can compare the symbols; others will prefer to see one symbol at a time.
* Spend time exploring each page with the person.
* Allow the individual to pick their own symbols.
* Say each symbol the person selects out loud so the individual knows you have the correct one.
* Warn the person before viewing symbols of a sexual or violent nature. Give the option to look at them or not look at them.
* If the individual says the name or concept of a symbol, find the symbol by using the index.
* If the individual cannot find a word they want, ask them to give you a clue or something like the word they want. They may be able to draw or spell the word.
* When guessing, start with general categories (e.g., is it about a place? Is it about a person?), then get more specific (e.g., is it a man?) and then start guessing within a smaller grouping.
* When you figure out the word, continue with the conversation.
* Some people who use AAC do not communicate in full sentences. They may rely on you to "co-construct" messages.

6 Some strategies by Suzanne Sgroi, M.D., New England Clinical Associates; Walter Coles, Retired Canadian Mounted Police; and Mary E. Hayden, University of Minnesota

* The individual gives the key words and you suggest what they might mean using these words. E.g. the person communicates, “Father home” and you may say "Are you telling me your father is at home?" If the person signals "no", you might suggest another meaning such as "You are going to visit your father at home?"
* Sometimes AAC users can give "missing parts" of the message. E.g. If the individual communicates "angry" -you might ask, "Who is angry?" and the person communicates "Jimbo" by spelling his name or pointing to a picture.
* Try not to interrupt the person when they are in the middle of conveying a message.
* If you are not sure when the person is finished with either viewing a symbol or telling their story, ask “Are you finished?”
* Say the words in the order that the AAC user points to them as symbols.
* Write down the words the individual is communicating in the order they were given. This will help you both in remembering conversations
* When the person is done pointing to symbols, repeat the words the person has selected and then be quiet. Allow the person time to add more information either through voice, gesture, pointing, writing, etc.

**Preserving the Narrative**

Once the individual has finished telling their story, they may wish to make a record of what they relayed through symbols on a communication display.

* + With the individual, select the symbols the person wants on the display.
  + On a copier, duplicate only the symbols the person has selected to relay their narrative. You may need to cut out the symbols from the duplicate.
  + Using your written account as a guide put the symbols the person selected on a piece of paper or board.
  + Organize the symbols in ways that make sense to the person, getting their input on items, layout and design.
  + Check to be sure the symbols accurately display what the individual wants to say.
  + Ensure that the person can see and touch the display.
  + Have the individual sign and date the display or do it for them if they prefer.
  + Ask the person if they want~~s~~ to keep the display or if they would rather someone else keep it for them. AAC users may be concerned about privacy and how the symbols that are selected will impact it.[8](#_bookmark4)

1. Speak Up Sexual Health and Safeguarding Communication Displays, December, 2004. Retrieved April 10, 2006 from <http://www.aacsafeguarding.ca/vocabulary-using_com_disp.htm#1>