**Who, What, Where, When: A Symbol Book for Victims who use Augmentative and Alternative Communication.**

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Illinois Imagines has worked creatively and collaboratively to envision and create a new way to serve people with disabilities who experience sexual violence. The Illinois Imagines team includes:

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**Purpose of the Symbol Book**

This symbol book can be used to augment communication between victims of abuse, neglect and exploitation who use augmentative and alternative communication and service providers for people with disabilities and/or providers of victim services. The book may be employed for counseling, interviewing, education, and/or abuse disclosure. While the book may prove helpful for those in the criminal justice system in communicating with and interviewing people with communicative disabilities, it is not intended as an investigative tool nor has it been tested for use in court.

The target audience for the use of this symbol book is people who have communicative disorders, which may include cognitive disabilities, cerebral palsy, autism, traumatic brain injury, speech disorders, learning disabilities, and mental health issues. Although not all people with disabilities have communicative disorders, for purposes of this book, we are referring to people whose disabilities include communicative disorders. Most people with communicative disorders can speak and understand speech, but may not effectively understand certain concepts. Remember to ask the person you are working with what is the best way to communicate. Each person communicates differently.

In these guidelines, we use the terms AAC user/individual interchangeably, as well as victim/survivor.

This symbol book is not intended to replace sign language or deaf interpreters for people who are deaf or hard of hearing. It may be useful as a supplemental visual accommodation, but is not specifically designed for their unique needs.

**Augmentative and Alternative Communication**

Augmentative and alternative communication refers to ways, other than speech, that are used to send a message from one person to another. We all use augmentative communication techniques, such as facial expressions, gestures, and writing as part of our daily lives. People with severe speech or language problems must rely heavily on these ways of communicating as well as on special augmentative techniques such as the use of sign language, interpreters, language boards, charts, computerized devices, writing, pointing, nodding, hand/feet movements, eye-blinking, hand-squeezing, etc. Objects may be represented by pictures, drawings, letters, words, sentences, special symbols, or any combination of these.

Language is complex and we continue to learn to use it every day. Developing the best communication system for people with a severe speech and language problem requires evaluation by many specialists. Therefore, not all people who use AAC are specially trained in the best communication methods for them and those who are have unique ways of communicating from one another.1

1American Speech-Language-Hearing Association Introduction to Augmentative and Alternative Communication (n.d.). Retrieved April 3, 2006 from <http://www.asha.org/public/speech/disorders/Augmentative-and-Alternative.htm>

**Limitations of Using Symbols**

It can be complicated to check for accuracy, especially when conversing with people you do not know well. A non-individualized symbol book will likely not contain all of the symbols which an individual who uses AAC may need. There is a difficulty of presenting symbols in a non-leading way when a victim is disclosing sexual assault, abuse, neglect or exploitation.

Because communication is complicated and unique to each person, this symbol book should be considered only one tool to be employed in talking with people who have communicative disorders and who have been victims of sexual assault, abuse, neglect or exploitation. Use of this book to converse with victims who use AAC has not been tested for iconicity nor is it known that those who use the book and guidelines will receive a precise narrative. It is one means for a victim who does not use or understand verbal language to begin to tell their story and to get the help and support they need~~s~~.

**Defining Abuse**

Sexual violence and abuse includes rape committed by strangers and non-strangers such as acquaintances, dates, spouses, helpers, caregivers, friends and family members. It also includes incest, child sexual abuse, sexual harassment, touching of private body parts, indecent exposure, and voyeurism. Sexual abuse may also include things such as being forced to watch or participate in the making of pornography. Sexual contact becomes assault when a person is unable to consent to an activity, does not consent, and/or when a service provider engages in sexual contact with a client. Victims/survivors of sexual violence can be forced, coerced, and/or manipulated into participating into sexual activity.

**Risk of Abuse**

It is the perpetrators who choose to sexually assault, abuse, neglect or exploit people with disabilities. Perpetrators often seek victims they perceive to be vulnerable and isolated from services and support. They exploit people who have disabilities for a variety of reasons:

* Communication deficits may prevent people from understanding the abuse or reporting it.
* Physical limitations may prevent a person from being able to get away from the abuser or defend herself in any way.
* Many people with physical disabilities need assistance with bathing, toileting, dressing and other personal cares. They may be touched intimately by dozens or even hundreds of caregivers during the course of their lives.
* Some people with disabilities are dependent on other people in many aspects of their lives. Fear of losing that support may keep a victim from disclosing.
* People with disabilities might not have been taught sexual or protective information. When abuse happens to them, they may not understand that it is wrong or that they should tell someone about it.
* Many people who use AAC do not have the symbols or other language to adequately report sexual assault, abuse, neglect or exploitation when it happens.
* Many people with disabilities have been taught to comply with authority throughout their lives. When an abuser asks him/her to do something or not tell about abuse, they may go along with it because they are expected to obey others. They may fear “getting in trouble” or that the abuser will be angry if they do not comply.

**Questioning Truth**

It is a myth that people with disabilities cannot give accurate information about abuse they have experienced. There are reasons which may add to this perception. We must always remember our first reaction and the most important reaction when someone discloses sexual assault, abuse, neglect or exploitation to you is to believe the victim. Some issues with information gathering may be:

* People may misunderstand the way in which an individual who uses AAC communicates.
* A person may not have the ability to understand time sequences.
* Other people’s use of verbal language may confuse the victim and ~~she~~ they may not adequately understand what is being asked.
* As with other people who are sexually assaulted, abused, neglected or exploited, the trauma of the abuse may alter the ability of a person with a disability to tell a coherent story.
* Past abuse may be misinterpreted as present abuse by the person to whom the abuse is reported.
* Abuse which was reported in the past may not have been believed so the person does not attempt to clarify the present abuse.
* Some people who use AAC report the fact of the sexual assault, abuse, neglect or exploitation but may have difficulty relaying the details surrounding it.
* Previous “unfounded” reports are not the same as false reports. All of the barriers previously discussed may have produced limited evidence for investigators or prosecutors to pursue a case.