Communication Aids – An Introduction

Being able to communicate is one of the most important skills a person can have, as almost everything we do in our daily lives involves communication.

Everybody uses different ways of communicating to help support messages they are trying to get across. This could include the use of gestures, visuals, sarcasm or humour.

For some autistic people communication may be understood and expressed in a different way to what society deems the expected norm. It is important to remember that the way we communicate as autistic people is not wrong and deficient - it is just different.

It is often about trying to work out what works best for the person involved, and being creative in how you support communication.

A term you may hear in relation to communication is *augmentative and alternative communication* (ACC). This term describes a range of techniques, tools and aids people can use to support their communication. They may be used to complement verbal communication or act as a replacement.

There are two main types of AAC systems:

- Unaided Communication- this refers to methods that do not require anything other than what a person already has available to them - their face, hands and body. An example of this is Makaton.
- Aided communication- this refers to methods which involve additional equipment. Examples of this are VOCA's or symbol books.

The main forms of AAC systems are:

Picture communication systems - these systems use pictures, photographs, or symbols to support communication exchanges.

VOCAS

VOCAS stands for voice output communication aids. These are electronic devices which enable a person to communicate using audible words. VOCAS can produce computerised speech by pressing buttons, switches or keys. There are numerous kinds of VOCAS which all work in different ways, some store words or phrases and allow the person to put together messages which are then spoken through the device.

Visual

Visual supports can be used to communicate with people and are adaptable and portable. Visual supports can be used in a variety of ways to provide a person with structure, routine, independence, confidence, aid understanding and provide opportunities for interactions with others. They can help

to make communication consistent and predictable. Some examples of visual supports are daily schedules, sequencing charts and choice boards.

Makaton

Makaton is a communication system that involves a person using a type of sign language to enable communication. With Makaton signs are used alongside speech and are not to be used as a replacement of speech. Where possible, eye contact should also be used alongside Makaton, as well as facial expressions and body language which all help to support the delivery of the communication. It is important in the beginning to start off with signs most relevant and important to the person.

There is no one size fits all AAC system and there isn't a most effective one either. It depends on personal ability, need, preference and understanding to decide what will work best. Some people may use several AAC systems.