

# Introduction to Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) for Parents and Teams

[at.center@ltvec.org](mailto:at.center@ltvec.org)

<https://www.tennesseetalks.org/>

*Janice Reese OTR/ATP*

[at.center@ltvec.org](mailto:at.center@ltvec.org)

*Sabina LaClair MS, CCC-SLP*

[sabina@ltvec.org](mailto:sabina@ltvec.org)

*Saskia Splane MS, CCC-SLP*

[saskia@ltvec.org](mailto:saskia@ltvec.org)

*Little TN Valley Educational Cooperative  
TN Talks SLP Consultants*

*We are employed through the TN Talks project but have no other financial or non-financial relationships to disclose.*

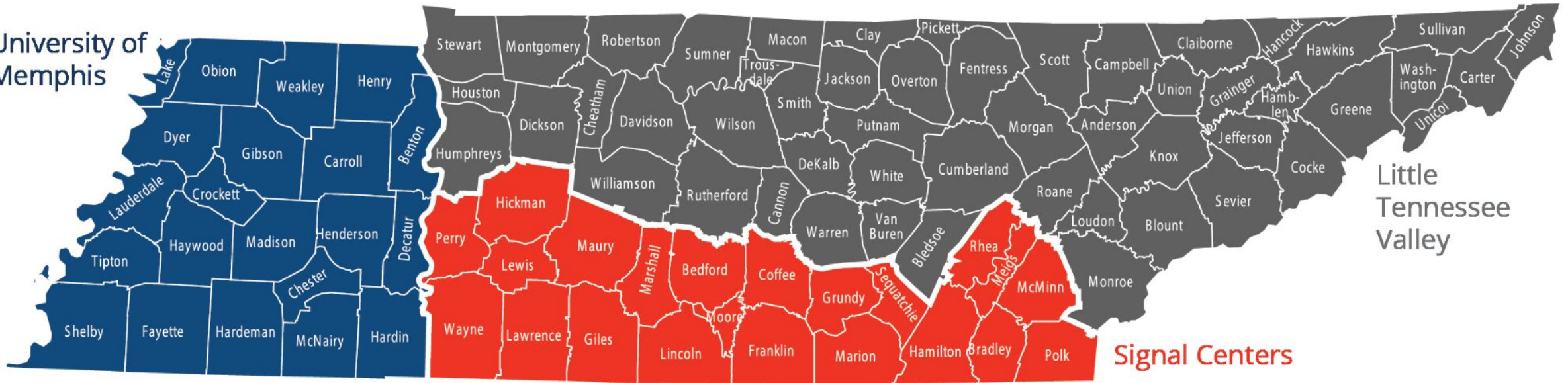
# Tennessee Talks



- Grant funded project by the TN Department of Education
- TN-DOE and regional centers are working together to positively impact the lives of students with complex communication needs
- The overarching goal of the project is to
  - Connect students with appropriate AT-AAC systems for improved life outcomes
  - Provide education and support for building AAC teams

<http://tennesseetalks.org/>

University of  
Memphis



Little  
Tennessee  
Valley

Signal Centers

# Definitions

# Assistive Technology (AT) -

IDEA law mandates that IEP teams ‘consider assistive technology’, including use of communication supports

**Assistive Technology Devices**—equipment that helps a person with a disability maintain, increase, or improve their ability to do something.

**Assistive Technology Services**—service that directly helps a person with a disability select, buy, or use an assistive technology device.

- evaluating assistive technology needs
- purchasing/funding equipment
- selecting, fitting, and repairing equipment
- training the person, family, teachers, employers, and others in the use of the equipment

# Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)

“AAC refers to an area of research, clinical, and education practice. AAC involves attempts to study and when necessary compensate for **temporary** or **permanent** impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions of individuals with severe disorders of speech-language production and/or comprehension, including spoken and written modes of communication” (ASHA SIG 12. 2005. p. 1).

- AAC is **augmentative** when used to supplement existing speech, and **alternative** when used in place of speech that is absent or not functional.
- AAC may be **temporary**, as when used by patients postoperatively in intensive care or to kickstart oral speech, or **permanent**, as when used by an individual who will require the use of some form of AAC throughout his or her lifetime.

Think about your daily communication.  
What do you use to communicate?

# Think about your daily communication. What do you use to communicate?

- Voice- both words and noises
  - Gestures
  - Texting
  - Touch
  - Facial expressions
  - Emails
- 
- AAC is any strategy, tool or device that an individual uses to solve everyday communicative challenges.



# Aided vs. Unaided Communication

- **AIDED**: Communication boards with icons, keyboards/written word, tablets with communication software, dedicated Speech Generating Devices (SGD)
- **UNAIDED**: Sign language, gestures, facial expression, body movements, vocalization, speech

*\*ICONS are defined as any visual representation of an object or activity (photographs, videos, tangible objects,*

# Everyone uses some form of AAC but who may benefit from AAC assessment and intervention?

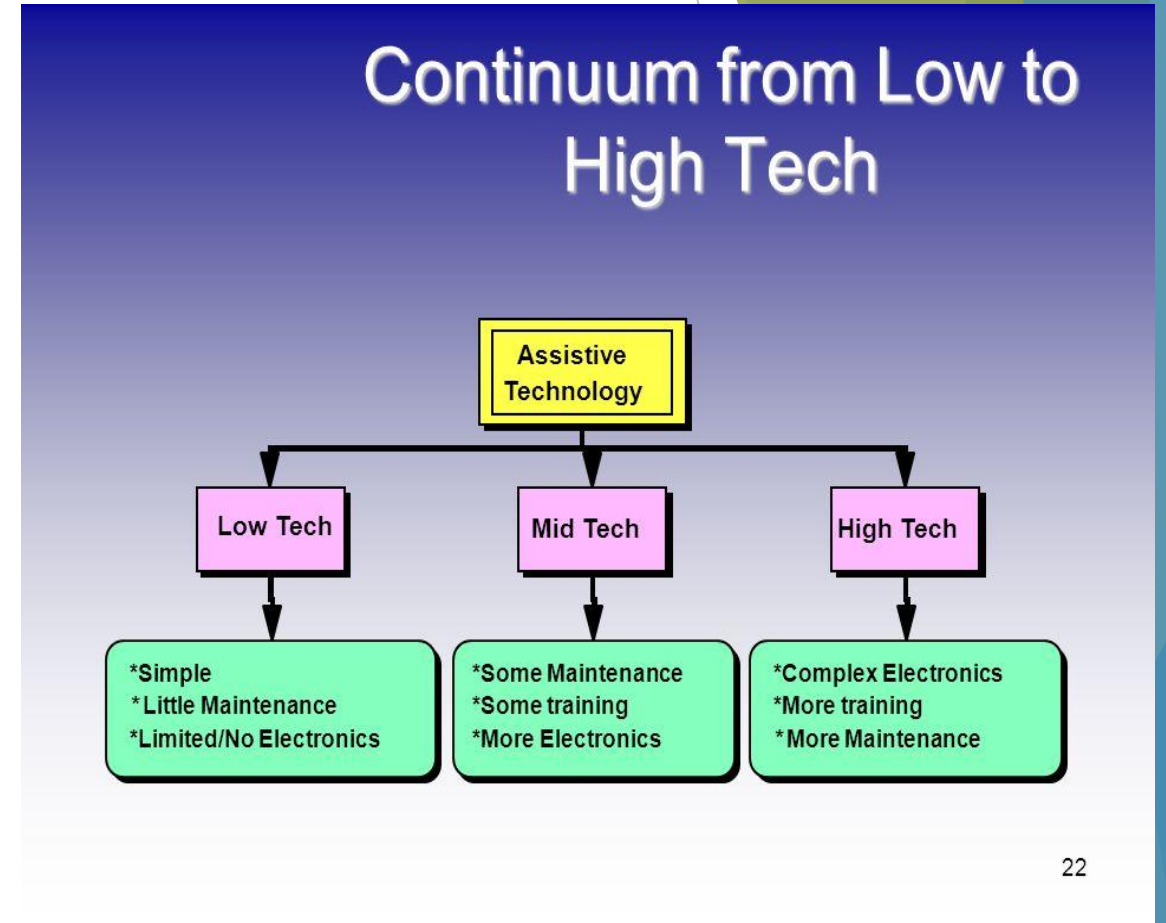
Anyone who is not a fully independent communicator!

- CP
- Autism
- TBI (brain injury)
- Down Syndrome
- Intellectual disabilities
- Syndromes
- Severe articulation/Apraxia

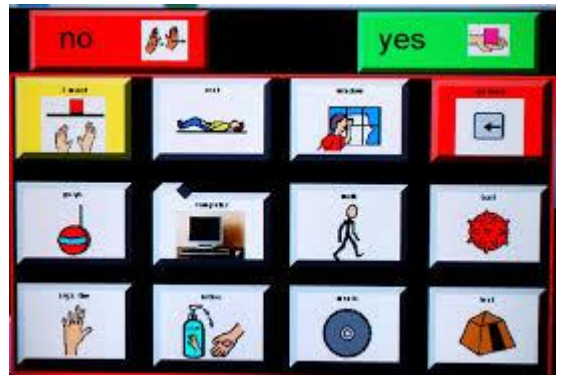
What does AAC look like?

# AAC Device Options

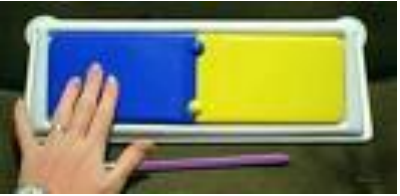
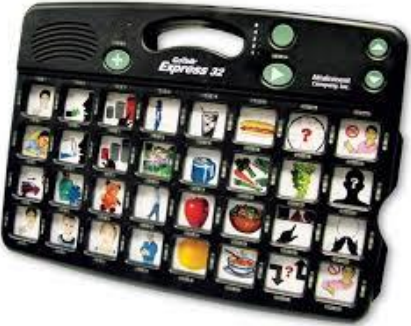
- Print-based materials (static displays)
- Voice Output Communication Aids (VOCA) -
  - Single message
  - Multiple message/levels
  - Sequential message
  - Random messages
- High-Tech touchscreen (dynamic displays)
- “Dedicated Speech Generating Devices” (SGD)



# Print Based / Rapid Access AAC



# Low-to-Mid Tech AAC Voice Output Communication Aids (VOCA)



# High-Tech AAC - Speech Generating Devices



## LANGUAGE REPRESENTATION METHODS

**Single-meaning pictures** - each picture means one thing and you point to, scan to, or select the picture you want. This requires a lot of effort to convey detailed messages.

**Alphabet systems** - person needs to be able to read and spell to use this type of system. Using letters of the alphabet, the person points or scans to each letter or word.

**Phrase/Sentence based system** - each picture has a phrase or full sentence attached to the picture. This is great for things that need to be said quickly, but does not allow for as much novel, generative language.

**Pictures with more than one meaning (semantic compaction)** - One picture can mean different things when they are combined with other pictures.



# Robust Vocabulary System

- Core Words
- Personal Core
- Fringe vocabulary
- Wide range of word classes (e.g., verbs, pronouns, modifiers, conjunctions, prepositions)
- Ability to make morphological changes (e.g., tense, pluralization, comparative/superlative)
- Access to the full alphabet








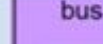
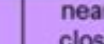


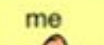
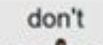
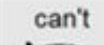
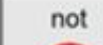
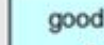
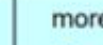



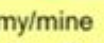
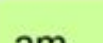

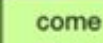
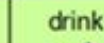

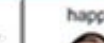
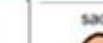

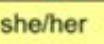
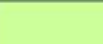
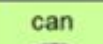
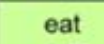
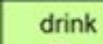
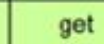
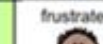



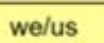
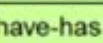
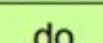
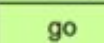
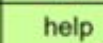
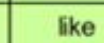
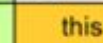
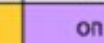
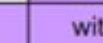

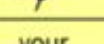
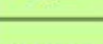
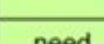
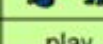

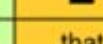
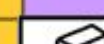





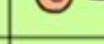

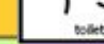
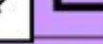
# CORE VOCABULARY

<https://www.aacandautism.com/>

[www.project-core.com](http://www.project-core.com)

“Core vocabulary refers to the small number of words that make up **70-90%** of what we say on a daily basis. These words are relevant *across contexts* and *can have many meanings...*”

Core vocabulary is powerful because it allows communicators to express a wide variety of concepts with a very small number of words.”

 bowling ball	 STRIKE!!!!	 SPARE!	 knock down pins	 put shoes on	 take shoes off	 bowling pin	 bus	 near/ close	 far/ away
 I	 me	to	 don't	 can't	 not	 good	 more	 all	 some
 it	 my/mine	 am are	the	 look / see	 come	 drink	 excited	 happy	 sad
 he/ him	 she/ her	 could	 can	 eat	 drink	 get	 frustrated	 bored	 in
 they/ them	 we/ us	 have- has	 do does	 go	 help	 like	 this	 on	 with
 you	 your	 was were	is	 need	 play	 say	 that	 toilet	 out
 one	 something	will	would	 take	 feel	 want	 work	 here	 there














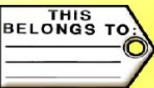




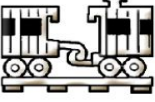













































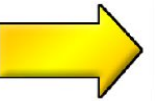

















## Top Words Used by Toddlers

- |     |                   |     |          |
|-----|-------------------|-----|----------|
| 1.  | a                 | 13. | no       |
| 2.  | all done/finished | 14. | off      |
| 3.  | go                | 15. | on       |
| 4.  | help              | 16. | out      |
| 5.  | here              | 17. | some     |
| 6.  | I                 | 18. | that     |
| 7.  | In                | 19. | the      |
| 8.  | is                | 20. | want     |
| 9.  | It                | 21. | what     |
| 10. | mine              | 22. | yes/yeah |
| 11. | more              | 23. | You      |
| 12. | my                |     |          |

# Activity - Using just these words, how many sentences can you make?

Vocab

Menu

finished 	mine 	little 	up 	yes 	good 	some 	no 	down 	out 	off 	bad 
me 	my 	wear 	am 	please 	that 	and 	in 	what ? word	a 	+s 	there 
I 	we 	are 	is 	were 	was 	on 	to 	SPELL/NU 	an 	the 	end 
you 	they 	new 	play 	like 	work 	have 	feel 	read 	more 	fast 	stop 
it 	he 	want 	all 	come 	time 	do 	go 	get 	big 	color 	help 
she 	look 	slow 	hear 	think 	right 	said 	live 	love 	follow 	ride 	put 
CLEAR	not 	talk 	sit 	eat 	find 	make 	need 	drink 	watch 	turn 	sleep 

LAMP: WFL  
1-Hit

PrAACtical AAC

**Project Core**

Center for Literacy & Disability Studies

The image displays various components of the Project Core communication system. At the top left, the text 'PrAACtical AAC' is visible. The main title 'Project Core' is prominently displayed in the upper center. Below the title, there are several grids of icons representing different words and concepts. On the left side, there are two 2x2 grids of icons for the words 'like', 'want', 'not', and 'go'. In the center, there are two larger grids of icons, one white and one black, each containing a 6x6 grid of icons. At the bottom, there is a row of four text cards for the words 'like', 'want', 'not', and 'go', each with a corresponding icon. The background features decorative elements like green leaves and colorful flowers.

# Project Core - UNC Chapel Hill

<http://www.project-core.com/communication-systems/>

# One size does NOT fit all

An AAC Evaluation is intended to identify the capabilities and needs of *each individual child* and match this with the most robust means of adapted communication.

# Myth Busters



True  
FALSE

A 1 ½ year old is too young for AAC.





**BUSTED!**

There is no such thing as being “too young” for AAC!

True  
FALSE

A 27 year old is too old to learn AAC.



**BUSTED!**

There is no such thing as being “too old” for AAC!  
Many older students have found success!

True  
FALSE

The student is too “low functioning” to communicate effectively.



**BUSTED!**

Everyone communicates, even if it is through body language and facial expression.

If we presume potential in all people, then we can find a way for them to communicate more effectively.

True  
FALSE

The student is too “behavioral” to use AAC.



**BUSTED!**

Behavior is communication.

When the person is taught a more effective means of communication, the “behavior” problem usually decreases.

True  
FALSE

The person is severely physically disabled and therefore cannot use AAC.





**BUSTED!**

Physical limitations do not impede access to AAC.

There are many options for access to AAC including eye gaze, switch access, neural control and the technology is getting better every day!

True  
FALSE

When it comes to AAC, you have to start with paper-based and move towards a high-tech device.



**BUSTED!**

You don't have to “start small and work our way up”. Often going directly to a robust system can let a person “take off” in their language development or show you that they've had a lot to say all along!

True  
FALSE

If someone uses AAC, they will not develop oral speech.



**BUSTED!**

AAC use will not hinder oral speech but will increase overall communication.

In fact, it has often been linked to an increase in oral speech.

# The AAC Assessment Process

# Build A Team Around the Person

## Required for a School Team

- Person being supported
- Family member(s)/ Caregiver(s)
- Teacher(s)
- SLP
- Administrator

## 'As Needed' Team Members

- Assistive Technology Specialists
- Occupational Therapists
- Physical Therapists
- Vision Specialists
- Behavioral Specialists
- Doctors

**DO NOT** make a decision without a team process - Multiple people who know and work with the child should provide input!

# Gather Information- and lots of it!

- Student strengths
- Areas of deficits
- Preferred people/items/places
- Current communication skills and strategies

Formal Assessments may also be completed:

- Language Evaluation
- Speech Intelligibility
- Physical Therapy Evaluation
- Occupational Therapy Evaluation
- Cognitive / Psychological Evaluation
- Vision/ Hearing Assessments

Level	A1	A2	A3	A4	A5	A6	A7	A8	A9	A10	A11	A12	A13	A14	A15	A16	A17
Level 1 Pre-Intentional Behavior	Expresses Discomfort	Expresses Comfort															
Level 2 Intentional Behavior	Protests	Continues Action	Obtains More of Something														
Level 3 Uncommunicative Communication	Requests Action	Requests New Action	Requests More Object	Make Choice	Requests New Object												
Level 4 Communicative Communication	Requests Action	Requests New Action	Requests More Object	Make Choice	Requests New Object	Requests Attention	Shows Attention	Greets People	Offers Objects	Directs Your Attention	Points Social Partners	Answers Verbal Questions	Asks Questions				
Level 5 Concrete Symbols	Requests Action	Requests New Action	Requests More Object	Make Choice	Requests New Object	Requests Attention	Shows Attention	Greets People	Offers Objects	Directs Your Attention	Points Social Partners	Answers Verbal Questions	Asks Questions	Names Things/People	Names Comments		
Level 6 Abstract Symbols	Requests Action	Requests New Action	Requests More Object	Make Choice	Requests New Object	Requests Attention	Shows Attention	Greets People	Offers Objects	Directs Your Attention	Points Social Partners	Answers Verbal Questions	Asks Questions	Names Things/People	Names Comments		
Level 7 Language	Requests Action	Requests New Action	Requests More Object	Make Choice	Requests New Object	Requests Attention	Shows Attention	Greets People	Offers Objects	Directs Your Attention	Points Social Partners	Answers Verbal Questions	Asks Questions	Names Things/People	Names Comments		
	Refuse	Obtain															



# Identify some appropriate AAC interventions/options to try

- What's already in use?
- What is working and not working with current system?
- Pick a few to try!
- AAC evaluation is often an extended process. Don't be in a hurry to "pick something".



# Implementation Trials

- Trial each device for 4-6 weeks. SLP will take data and tweak any needs for the student throughout trial period.
- At the end of the trial period, team members will meet to discuss progress.
  - Is different hardware/software needed?
  - Pros vs Cons
  - What's working? What's not working?
- Is the trialed device sufficient to fit their needs at this time?
- Choosing the right device involves trials of multiple systems over an extended period of time to assure effective choice
- Complete the assessment using trials of multiple device brands (*device vendors are only going to recommend their stock!*)
- Trials should be conducted in multiple settings! (School, home, and the community)

## Acquire the Device

- Devices purchased through insurance belong to the child.
- SGD vendors are skilled with the funding process and can often help direct families/teams to alternative funding sources.
- Families can pursue funding support through private organizations that provide grants or devices; this is a great time to take advantage of the iPad and AAC app option
- Parents can refuse to purchase a system using their insurance. Schools should provide the student with “a comparable system” that will meet their needs (*but does NOT have to be the device of parent preference*)

## HOT TIPS!

- Do **NOT** fall prey to sales pitches for iPads with AAC apps as a long-term SGD option. There are too many issues and this system is rarely the right choice. iPads sold as SGDs are funded at the same cost, but have added risks
- SGDs can be covered through insurance as durable medical equipment, but can only be replaced once every 5 years
- Only a licensed speech therapist (with CCC credentials) can conduct and document the AAC assessment

# Develop an Implementation Plan

- The Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is the legal document that determines what occurs at school for a child's education that is deemed eligible for special education.
- All assistive technologies used, including AAC, should be listed in the IEP.
- IDEA law mandates that IEP teams 'consider assistive technology', including use of communication supports
  - All students who lack an effective means of communicating should be evaluated for possible AAC interventions.
- The IEP is also where you can request training for the team or additional AT services.

# Welcome to the world of AAC!

- There are many, many supports for assessing and implementing AAC.
- AAC is complex and not all clinicians or educators are familiar or skilled. Sometimes the school team is learning right along with the family and student!
- Call in unbiased specialists when needed.
- Carryover in all environments is vital to communication success!

# Tennessee Talks is here to help!

- Assist school-based SLP staff with student communication and AAC assessments
- Identify necessary access supports (e.g., switches, mounts, etc.)
- Equipment / Device lending library
- Provide support with device programming
- Provide staff and parent trainings

Just a few additional resources!  
There are plenty more!



**PrAACtical AAC**

<https://practicalaac.org/>

**Communication Matrix**

<https://www.communicationmatrix.org/>

**See Me? See my AAC - parent blog -**

<http://www.kimrankin.com/new-blog/2017/6/4/see-me-see-my-aac>

**Speech and Language Kids - great resources**

<https://www.speechandlanguagekids.com/giving-voice-non-verbal-children-autism-aac-autism/>



# More resources, different format!

## Podcasts



## Facebook Groups

- ▶ AAC Through Motivate, Model, Move Out Of The Way
- ▶ Ask Me, I'm an AAC user! (24 hour rule!)
- ▶ AAC- Alternative Awesome Communicators

# FAMILY AAC TRAINING SESSIONS (FAACTS)



<https://www.tennesseetalks.org/events/family-aac-training-faact-session>



**Welcome to Tennessee Talks!**

<https://www.tennesseetalks.org/>

[at.center@ltvec.org](mailto:at.center@ltvec.org)