Augmentative and Alternative Communication

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Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) refers to all means and modes a person uses to communicate, including pointing, manual signing, finger spelling, eye gaze and facial expressions as well as Assistive Technology. There are also machines that use symbols or pictures to promote communication. These devices can be used in place of speech or to aide in the ability to gain speech. The low-tech versions include PECS, yes/no cards, wipe boards and others. Assistive technology devices can be the answer to helping your child communicate with you and others. They can also be used to support academic learning in the classroom or at home. Augmentative communication does not eliminate the use of verbal speech. Both can be worked on as goals for your child. Make sure that different assistive technology devices are tried to find the best one for your child.

Typically a speech therapist with a specialty in AAC will evaluate your child for the need and use of an augmentative communication device. It can be simple or complicated, but the goal is to help the child develop communication skills, and there are many options available. They can be as simple as picture communication symbols or using a battery-operated recorder to play back a single message. Devices can also be very complex, offering a child access to a large vocabulary. Many schools and service agencies are now using Assistive Tech Specialists for augmentative communication evaluations and trainings. It is important that you convey your specific want when asking your school system for an "Assistive Technology Assessment." If you are primarily meaning for an Augmentative Communication evaluation you should convey this. Not all AT evaluations include AAC.

There are a number of methods commonly used to help bridge the communication gap.
- Assistive Technology devices
- Augmentative Communication methods
- PECS
- Sign Language
- Keyboarding
- Rapid Prompting Method
- Facilitated Communication
- Computer Software

Assistive Technology: Rights under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Under IDEA, AT must be considered for children with disabilities if it is needed to receive a "free and appropriate public education." It is the school district's responsibility to help select and acquire the technology, as well as provide training to the student in the use of the technology, and, at no cost to parents. This is done on a case-by-case

basis. It is the IEP team (including parents and students) that makes a determination as to the necessity of AT. It is also the IEP team, (or any individual member) that initiates a request for an AT assessment. The assessment may be performed by school district personnel, or an outside consultant working in conjunction with the IEP team. IDEA 2004 requires IEP teams to consider the assistive technology needs of all children with disabilities. (20 U.S.C. 1414(d)(3)(B)(v))

The IEP team makes decisions about assistive technology devices and services based on your child's unique needs so that he can be more confident and independent. The law requires schools to use assistive technology devices and services "to maximize accessibility for children with disabilities." (20 U.S.C. 1400(c)(5)(H))

If the IEP team determines that your child needs assistive technology devices and services, the school district is responsible for providing these and cannot use lack of availability or cost as an excuse.

IDEA defines an 'assistive technology device' as... any item, piece of equipment, or product system, whether acquired commercially off the shelf, modified, or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities of a child with a disability. (20 U.S.C. 1401(1))

IDEA defines an 'assistive technology service' as... any service that directly assists a child with a disability in the selection, acquisition, or use of an assistive technology device. Such term includes -

(A) The evaluation...
(B) Purchasing, leasing, or otherwise providing for the acquisition of assistive technology devices...
(C) Selecting, designing, fitting, customizing, adapting, applying, maintaining, repairing, or replacing...
(D) Coordinating and using other therapies, interventions, or services with assistive technology devices...
(E) Training or technical assistance for such child, or ...the family of such child...
(F) Training or technical assistance for professionals... (20 U.S.C. 1401(2))

IDEA 2004 also requires schools to provide assistive technology training for the teachers, child, and family. (20 U.S.C. 1400(2)(E) & (F))

Your child's teachers may need training so they know how to use a device. Your child and your family may need A.T. services so you can learn to use a device. Assistive technology services, including training, need to be written in your child's IEP. If you think your child needs assistive technology, you need to request that the IEP team refer your child for an evaluation for assistive technology.