



Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)

What are signs/symbols?

Very simply, a **sign** is a gesture, usually a hand gesture, which is used to represent a word. A symbol is an object or picture which is used to represent a word or idea. A **sign** is always used with spoken language and a **symbol** is usually used with spoken and/or written language. Signs and symbols can be used with **all** children and young people to support their communication development. They are often used to help children who are struggling with their communication skills.

I've heard about AAC. What does it mean?

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (**AAC**) is the use of different types of communication that don't rely on only speech (but might be used alongside it). It is often used when children and young people have more complex communication difficulties. This can involve low tech aids, such as signs and symbols on card or paper, or more high tech aids such as computer software which may use a computer generated voice and have a symbol programme.

For more information on AAC and communication aids visit: acecentre.org.uk

I heard signing can be used to support my child to learn, is this true?

Yes, signing and the use of symbols can support **all** children and young people with their language development. Using signs together with talking helps children to concentrate and listen to what is being said. It gives children something to look at as well as hearing the words and can therefore support them in making the connection between spoken words and their meaning. You may have seen that Mr Tumble on CBBC uses signs and symbols and there is more information on his website:

www.bbc.co.uk/cbeebies/shows/something-special

I CAN Help enquiry service www.ican.org.uk/help

Call 020 7843 2544 to arrange a free phone call from one of our speech and language therapists or email enquiries@ican.org.uk

Talking Point www.talkingpoint.org.uk

Visit this website for information about children's communication.



It's been suggested I use sign with my child but I'm worried this will stop him learning to talk. Will it?

No, using signs or symbols will not stop your child from learning to talk, in fact it might help. Signs and symbols support language learning by giving children a visual prompt to help them understand what the adult is saying. Because they will still hear the words they have the opportunity to learn to say them too.

When using signs and symbols you will still speak in sentences, and it is only the 'key words' in the sentence where signs/symbols are used eg: "Do you want to the **doll** or the **bike**?" or "Its **bathtime**, then off to **bed**". This makes the language is easier to follow.

My child's nursery uses signs and symbols, should I use them at home too?

Some early years settings use signs and symbols to support all children in their care, including those with English as an additional language. The setting may use signs and symbols to:

- label objects and toys
- sequence events
- illustrate songs/stories

You may wish to do the same at home. Remember to talk to the staff about how you plan to use the sign/symbols and:

- use the same sign, pictures and objects as the setting
- use the spoken words at the same time

Why are signs/symbols useful for children with Speech Language and Communication Needs (SLCN)?

Communication systems using sign and symbols are very useful for children with SLCN. They give children whose speech is difficult to understand a way of getting their message across successfully. It lets them make a contribution that others will understand and so take part in activities. When signs and symbols are used by adults, language becomes easier for children to understand and to learn. This is because they will speak more slowly and use shorter and simpler sentences and make the important words stand out.

I want to use signs and symbols but where do I get these?

You can use natural gesture, real objects or photos of everyday objects in the home. Your local NHS services may provide sign and symbol courses or resources, or you can contact www.makaton.org.

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Tips for using signs and symbols

When using signs/symbols with your child remember:

- Get down to your child's level and gain their attention
- Only use signs/symbols for the key words in a sentence for example "Do you want **milk** or **juice**?", "Get the **cup** and put it on the **table**" Always use the same sign/symbol for the same action, object or idea
- Always say the word at the same time as you use the sign/symbol
- Leave lots of time for your child to look at the sign/symbol and to respond

My child has significant SLCN and struggles to get his message across. Would a computer or iPad be useful?

Some children may find communication difficult as they have little or no clear speech. A speech and language therapist will assess your child's abilities and provide you with specific information. Your child will need a system which is right for them and this might be low tech options such as symbol cards or more high tech options such as computer systems with pre-recorded words and sentences. All children's communication needs are different and so will be the way they are supported.

Useful I CAN Factsheets

I CAN have produced factsheets on both visual timelines and iPad and tablet apps. These can be downloaded from the I CAN Help section of the I CAN website [here](#).

Useful websites

- acecentre.org.uk – Experts in AAC and AT offering assessment, training and resources.
- www.makaton.org – A sign/symbol system, they provide training, resources, information and support
- www.talkingmats.com – A communication aid using picture symbols. They offer products, training and a helpline
- www.pecs-unitedkingdom.com – A communication system using picture symbols. They offer training, workshops and support
- www.afasic.org.uk – Communication charity providing support for parents and children/young people with communication difficulties and SLCN. They provide training, courses and workshops, advice and a helpline.
- www.communicationmatters.org.uk – specialise in AAC and complex needs. They provide assessments, information and support.

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