

## **Decision-Making Guide for Assistive Technology (AT) & Augmentative & Alternative Communication (AAC)**

*A Practical Framework for Educators and Teams*

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### **Purpose & Legal Framework**

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that assistive technology (AT) be considered for every student with an IEP. AT supports access, participation, and independence across school environments.

Augmentative & Alternative Communication (AAC) is a subset of AT specifically focused on expressive and receptive communication. Effective decision-making ensures that students receive tools matched to their needs, implemented with fidelity, and supported through training.

Expanding beyond compliance, AT and AAC decision-making represents a commitment to equity, access, and student voice. The right tool can open doors to communication, literacy, and independence that might otherwise remain closed. For some students, this means accessing curriculum more effectively; for others, it means finding their voice for the very first time.

When teams follow a structured process grounded in data, collaboration, and evidence-based practice they not only meet the legal requirement but also maximize the likelihood of meaningful, lasting impact.

Research highlights the importance of intentional implementation. Studies show that AT and AAC tools are most effective when they are embedded across settings, paired with direct instruction, and supported by ongoing training for staff and families (Zabala, 2005; Beukelman & Light, 2020).

Tools themselves do not guarantee success; fidelity, consistency, and responsiveness do. As such, decision-making should be viewed as a cycle of identifying barriers, trialing supports, collecting data, and adjusting as needed.

This guide offers teams a practical framework for moving through that cycle with clarity, accountability, and a shared focus on student independence.

## Definitions & Key Distinctions

| Term                                                      | Definition                                                                                                                                           | Examples                                                                  |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Assistive Technology (AT)</b>                          | Any item, piece of equipment, or product system used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities. | Pencil grips, adapted seating, screen readers, speech-to-text software    |
| <b>Augmentative &amp; Alternative Communication (AAC)</b> | A subset of AT focused on supporting or replacing speech and language for communication purposes.                                                    | Picture exchange systems, communication boards, speech-generating devices |

## Decision-Making Process for AT/AAC

| Step                            | Guiding Questions                                                             | Evidence Sources                                        | Example Actions                                            |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Identify the Barrier</b>     | What specific task or skill is impacted?                                      | Observations, IEP data, teacher/family input            | Note difficulties in accessing curriculum or communicating |
| <b>Gather Data &amp; Input</b>  | What does the student currently use successfully? What has been tried before? | Work samples, past AT trials, student interviews        | Document current strategies and outcomes                   |
| <b>Match Needs to Tools</b>     | Which tools (low- to high-tech) might address the barrier?                    | AT catalogs, AAC comparison charts, expert consultation | Select 2–3 tools for trial                                 |
| <b>Trial Period</b>             | How will we measure the tool's effectiveness?                                 | Trial logs, frequency counts, performance checklists    | Use selected tool for set time with defined metrics        |
| <b>Review Data &amp; Decide</b> | Did the tool meet the student's needs?                                        | Progress monitoring data, student/family feedback       | Select, adjust, or try another tool                        |

|                                |                                                         |                                         |                                                    |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Plan for Implementation</b> | Who needs training?<br>How will it be integrated daily? | Team planning notes, training schedules | Train staff, model use, embed in multiple settings |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|

### Quick Reference: AT & AAC Options Spectrum

**Low-Tech AT:** pencil grips, slant boards, visual schedules, adapted paper

**High-Tech AT:** speech-to-text software, screen readers, electronic organizers

**Low-Tech AAC:** picture exchange systems, communication boards, core word boards

**High-Tech AAC:** speech-generating devices, iPad with communication apps, eye-gaze systems

### Implementation & Follow-Up Checklist

- Assign responsibility for training and support.
- Model use for staff, peers, and family members.
- Incorporate tool use into multiple environments and activities.
- Monitor fidelity of use through observations and logs.
- Schedule review dates to assess effectiveness and adjust as needed.

### Case Study: From No AAC to Successful Use

Maria, a middle school student with a traumatic brain injury, relied primarily on gestures and facial expressions. The team identified communication as a major barrier to participation in class discussions. They gathered input from teachers, therapists, and Maria's family, and trialed a low-tech core word board.

Data showed improved engagement but limited vocabulary access. The team then trialed a speech-generating device with a robust language system. After staff and family training, Maria independently used the device to answer questions, initiate conversations, and participate in group work. The team embedded device use into all classes, monitored progress, and updated goals to reflect her increased communication independence.

### Common Pitfalls & How to Avoid Them

- Jumping to high-tech solutions without exploring low-tech options first.

- Failing to provide adequate staff training.
- Neglecting to integrate the tool into multiple settings.
- Stopping use without reviewing data on effectiveness.
- Assuming the device alone will lead to skill improvement without instructional support.

### **Action Starter: Try Tomorrow**

- Identify one student who may benefit from AT/AAC and schedule a discussion with the IEP team.
- Trial one low-tech AAC option for a week and collect data on usage and effectiveness.
- Review the last IEP you wrote to confirm AT was formally considered and documented.