

## **Policy for the use of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) Devices and Assistive Technology**

### **Introduction & Rationale:**

This policy was formulated by Staff and Board of Management of Saplings Special School for Children with Autism and Complex Needs, Kill (hereafter Saplings). The purpose of the policy is to:

- (1) Define and provide examples of AAC
- (2) Provide information on the approach of Saplings to the assessment for, and the identification of, the correct AAC device for each student of the school as appropriate
- (3) Clarify the requirements and responsibilities the student him/herself and/or the key adults and services involved in sustaining the functional and valued use of the AAC device.

### **Definition of AAC:**

Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) is an umbrella term that encompasses the communication methods or devices used to **supplement** speech and writing for persons with impairments in the production or comprehension of spoken or written language. For some persons, AAC is a stepping-stone to communication and will be faded once progress in speech and communication has been made. For others, some method of AAC may remain a main route to communication throughout life. In Saplings, due to the structured behavioural

framework that is used throughout the school to guide both teaching and learning, the Behaviour Analyst is the key link person between home, school and external professionals (e.g. HSE Speech and Language Therapists) in relation to AAC.

**Forms of AAC:**

AAC includes unaided systems that do not require the use of additional technologies. Examples of these include use of body language (e.g., gestures and manual signs), facial expressions and sign.

Where additional technologies are required to supplement a person’s ability to communicate effectively and clearly, communication is considered aided and or augmented. There are many different technologies available for aiding or augmenting communication and can be divided into two categories: (1) Low tech and; (2) High Tech. The table below provides examples of technologies available to use in the low tech and high tech categories but these lists are not exhaustive.

Low Tech Aided AAC Devices	High Tech Aided AAC Devices
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pictures</li> <li>• Objects (e.g, objects of reference)</li> <li>• Photographs</li> <li>• Writing</li> <li>• Communication boards</li> <li>• Communication books (e.g., Picture Exchange Communication System)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Speech generating devices (SDGs)</li> <li>• Single-message devices and recordable/digitised devices</li> <li>• AAC software that enables dynamic symbol/ language representation and that is used with some form of technology hardware (e.g., computer, tablet, smartphone)</li> </ul>

**Why use AAC:**

AAC helps a person to communicate more effectively with those around them. AAC can:

- (1) Allow a student to express their wants/ needs/ thoughts/ feelings etc.
- (2) Reduce problem behaviour that stems from frustration, due to an inability to communicate effectively with others
- (3) Improve opportunities for meaningful social interactions with others
- (4) Increase independence and reduce dependence on others in the student’s environment;

(5) Increase access to the educational curriculum.

**Myth Buster:** It is often thought that the use of AAC devices negatively affects the use of speech; however, experimentally controlled research studies examining the impact of aided AAC devices and speech has provided evidence for the contrary, repeatedly demonstrating that AAC devices have no negative effect on speech production and that, in fact, the use of AAC devices may result in improvements in speech for many persons (Charlop-Christy, Carpenter, Loc, LeBlanc & Kellet, 2002; Yoder & Stone, 2006). Additionally, Millar, Light & Schlosser (2006) conducted a synthesis of literature investigating the impact of AAC devices and speech production and found that, as a result of AAC intervention:

- 0% of cases demonstrated decreases in speech production
- 11% showed no change in speech production
- 89% demonstrated gains in speech production

### **Assessment Process**

A team approach will be used, where possible, to assess each students need for unaided and/or aided AAC devices. The team will include:

- the student him/herself, where possible
- the student's parents or primary caregivers
- the school's Behaviour Analyst
- the student's Class Teacher
- the school's Principal
- the student's Speech and Language Therapist (as appropriate)
- any other relevant professionals such as the students Occupational Therapist (as appropriate)

It is desirable that all persons, named above, contribute to the assessment process; however, there may be instances where one or more of the persons named above may not be available or in a position to contribute to the assessment. When such an instance occurs, the assessment and decision will be made by the primary stakeholders in the lives of the students. For the purpose of this policy, primary stakeholders are those persons with whom student has the greatest contact with in his/ her life e.g.:

- the student him/herself, where possible
- the student's parents or primary caregivers
- the school's Behaviour Analyst
- the student's Class Teacher
- the school's Principal

When considering which AAC devices will best suit the student, the following factors will be taken into account:

1. The contexts within which the student will use the AAC device, including the range of people he/she will want to communicate with.
2. The student's past and current methods used to communicate his/her needs across environments, including an evaluation of whether such methods meaningfully function/ed for the student. In addition to this (where possible), the student's prognosis of speech and language development will be considered.
3. How the chosen device will be able to meet the needs of the student over time, evolving into an age appropriate and efficient system as the student grows older.
4. The framework that will be used with the student to provide a structured learning environment in order to give the student the best chance of success.
5. Whether the system will augment all or only one aspect of communication.

### **Sustaining the Use of AAC Devices:**

Sustaining the functional and valued use of the AAC devices involves the shared and consistent actions of the student him/herself and/or the key adults and services involved in the student's life.

Aided AAC devices represent the student's voice and, therefore, should only be used for this purpose.

\*Please note of how the information in *italics* relates to your child [i.e., whether your child uses a low tech aided AAC device (PECS/Visual Communication Board etc.) or a high tech aided AAC device (Proloquo2Go, Grace App etc.)]

<p align="center"><b>Responsibilities of the Student/ Parent/Caregiver</b></p>	<p align="center"><b>Responsibilities of the School</b></p>
<p><b>Charging the Device:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>It is the responsibility of the parent or caregiver to ensure that the student’s device is charged to enable full use in home and school contexts; therefore, we ask the parent to ensure that the student’s device is fully charged before the start of the school day.</i></li> <li>• <i>If it is possible to include the student in the activities surrounding charging his/her device, it is strongly recommended to do so; however, it is the parent or caregivers sole responsibility to ensure that the student’s device is fully charged.</i></li> </ul> <p><b>Power Accessories:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Electronic devices require a source of power. Students’ cannot be tethered to a wall outlet in order to communicate. AAC devices, therefore, may require batteries, battery chargers, AC adaptors and external battery packs etc. Students’ who use their devices throughout the day may often need to purchase additional power accessories to minimise the risk that the student has no means to communicate. We, therefore, ask parents to send a charged external battery pack into school in the student’s bag from</i></li> </ul>	<p><b>Charging the Device:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Saplings will be in a position to charge a student’s aided AAC device on occasion but the overall responsibility for sending in a pre-charged device lies solely with the parent/ caregiver.</li> </ul> <p><b>Power Accessories:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is the responsibility of the classroom teacher and other staff members to ensure that the power accessories (e.g., external battery pack) supplied are used to enable the student to use his/her device.</li> <li>• It is also the responsibility of the classroom teacher and other staff members to ensure that the student’s power accessories (e.g., external battery pack) are either in the student’s bag or tethered to the student’s device at home time.</li> </ul>

*Monday to Friday.*

- *It is the responsibility of the parent or caregiver to ensure that the student's external battery pack is fully charged and ready to use, if and when required.*

**Condition of the Device and Hygiene:**

- *It is the responsibility of the parent or caregiver to ensure that the student's device and accompanying accessories are in a condition that allows functional use. If for any reason the device is damaged in the home environment we would encourage parents to make the arrangements to get it fixed as soon as is possible. In addition to this and in the meantime, if the device is functioning please send the device in until such time that it needs to be repaired. Please communicate this to the class teacher through the usual means of communication (i.e. communication diary or phoning the secretary).*
- *If the device is being repaired and, therefore, cannot be sent into school with the student, please communicate this via a phone call or voicemail to the school phone (045 878760) before 9.00am. This will allow the classroom teacher and other staff members some time to prepare any materials that may be required to support the student throughout his/her school day.*

**Condition of the Device and Hygiene:**

- It is the responsibility of the class teacher to communicate to the student's parent or caregiver if the student's device has been damaged during the school day and on the school grounds. However, the school will not accept any liability for any loss or damage caused to the device caused.
- It is the responsibility of the class teacher and other staff members to ensure that the student's device is cleaned if substances appear on the surface of the student's device using a cloth dampened with water and a cloth to dry. If it is possible to include the student in the activities surrounding cleaning his/her device, it is strongly recommended to do so.
- If substances appear in other areas other than the surface, the class teacher and other staff members will not clean the device but will communicate to the parent or caregiver where the substance is located, if known.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>It is the responsibility of the parent or caregiver to ensure that the student's device is cleaned regularly and appropriately. If it is possible to include the student in the activities surrounding cleaning his/her device, it is strongly recommended to do so.</i></li> </ul> <p><b>Protecting the Device:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Electronic devices require a case to protect the device. Appropriate cases are those that are strong and offer excellent shock absorbency. In addition to this, screen protectors may be necessary. It is the parent and caregivers responsibility to ensure that the device is protected to the greatest extent possible.</i></li> <li>• <i>It is also the responsibility of the parent or caregiver to ensure that the case and/or screen protector is secured to the device upon arrival to school from Monday to Friday.</i></li> </ul>	<p><b>Protecting the Device:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is the responsibility of the class teacher or other staff members to ensure that the case and/or screen protector is secured to the device throughout the school day and upon leaving the school premises to arrival at the school bus/ parent.</li> </ul>
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If an AAC device is not sent into school with a student, it will be the responsibility of the secretary to phone the parents/ caregivers and ask that they deliver the device to the school as soon as possible.

If an AAC device is not sent home by a staff member, it will be the responsibility of the secretary to phone the parents/ caregivers and arrange for the device to be collected or dropped to the student's home.

For both parties (i.e., parent/ caregiver and school), failure to communicate or participate in any of the above on three occasions will result in an immediate review of the suitability of the AAC device and its use across contexts for the student him/herself.

If for any reason the student will not present to school with their AAC device on a given day, please communicate this via a phone call or voicemail to the school phone (045 878760) before 9.00am. This will allow the classroom teacher and other staff members some time to prepare any materials that may be required to support the student throughout his/her school day.

**Ratification:**

This policy was reviewed and ratified by the Board of Management in October 2019. It is envisaged that this policy will be reviewed in 2022.

Ratified by Board of Management on: \_\_\_\_\_

Signed (chairperson): \_\_\_\_\_