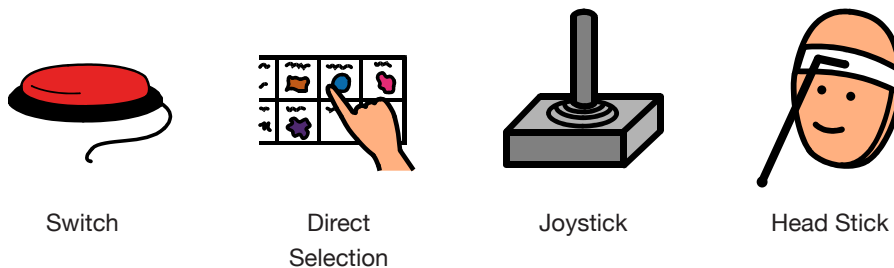


Choosing Selection Methods for High-Tech AAC

Communication for most people is simple. We think of what we want to say and begin talking. Our mouth moves and our respiratory system and vocal cords coordinate automatically. We think about what we are going to say not how we are going to say it. Speech is usually something we don't have to think about. We just do it.

People using augmentative communication are producing messages using means other than speech. They might be using their hand to touch a symbol on a communication board or use a joystick or switch to select a message on a communication device.



These are called “selection methods” or “access methods.” Individuals with physical disabilities can have great difficulty coordinating their movements to select messages on a communication device. Therefore, the selection method chosen for an individual must be the easiest and fastest. In other words, selection should require as little thought for the AAC user as speech requires for those of us who use speech.

Choosing a method of selection can be very easy. A person who has good control of his fingers, hands and arms on at least one side of his body might be able to use those body parts to select. Some individuals use their feet or eyes. However, it can be more challenging if an individual has less control over parts of their body. Many decisions need to be made along the way to ensure the selection method is as easy as possible.

What are the types of selection methods?

Direct selection is directly using a part of the body or tool to make a choice. On our telephone, we use our finger to directly select the numbers on the dial pad. In a geography lecture, the professor may use a light pointer to indicate an area on a large map. When using direct selection the individual is able to point to all possible message choices (symbols, words, letters, etc.) on their communication device. They can directly select using their fingers, hands, eyes, toes; or through the use of a pointing device such as a head pointer, mouth stick, beam of light, or pointing using eye gaze.

Indirect selection means that the AAC user is not touching the device himself. Instead, there are steps in between which allow them to make the selection (Cook A. M. & S. M. Hussey. 1995. *Assistive Technologies: Principles and Practice*. St. Louis, MO: Mosby-Year Book, Inc.). Scanning is the most common type of indirect selection. Scanning involves the systematic presentation of a symbol (icon, letter, word, etc.) choice visually and/or auditorily to the user. The user selects the message by activating a switch (that may be located next to their head or hand for example) at the moment the cursor or indicator electronically highlights the desired word, letter or icon.

Choosing a primary and/or secondary selection method

Consider this example: For most of the day, Harold is positioned in a wheelchair. His communication device is mounted to his wheelchair and he can use his hand to select messages. Harold's primary selection method is direct selection with his finger. However, late afternoon he usually sits in a recliner. In this position he cannot control his hand as well. How will he access his device? He will need a secondary selection method. In this case, he might use a switch to scan through the messages on his page.

Some issues to consider when deciding on the primary (or secondary) selection method include the AAC user's positioning throughout the day, level of endurance, language and communication needs, attention and concentration. It is important to get input from a variety of sources (occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech-language pathologist, families, caregivers, teachers, vision consultants) when choosing a selection method. Each individual will have information from their own expertise and experience to assist in making the best decision. Once the decision is made, the primary means of selection is not set in stone. It should be reviewed regularly by the team and revised as needed.

The main selection method should be a "no brainer" rather than something that needs to be improved. The secondary method of selection may be more challenging motorically or cognitively than the primary.

The ease and speed of a selection method has a profound effect on an AAC user's ability to communicate and should be chosen well.



using finger



using a head pointer



using eye gaze

Courtesy of the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago. Revised June 2014, DynaVox.

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