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Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC) and its relationship to autism



I have worked on and off with autistic children since I was twelve years old, and learning how to communicate with the kids and help them communicate with me has always really fascinated me. I'd like to delve more closely into this topic for my thesis. Specifically, I want to look at Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC), because for many autistic individuals, clear and effective communication is only possible when mediated by AAC technology. AAC refers to "an area of clinical practice that attempts to compensate either temporarily or permanently for the impairment and disability patterns of individuals with severe and expressive communication disorders" (Cumley 1992). I would like to explore how these AAC devices and/or strategies shape the interactions of autistic children. In addition, I will be looking at how people react to the idea of an autistic child using an AAC device and whether their communication style changes when interacting with someone using a device. A separate section will explore whether this all ties into a societal tendency to equate language skills with personhood. An introductory section will provide an overview of autism, while a tentatively planned section will look at the parallels between autistic children being given AAC devices and Deaf children learning sign language, both of which have been protested by parents who want their children to learn to speak English. If possible, information about the history and development of AAC will be included where appropriate.

There are several questions I want to research, both by looking at others' works and by including my own observations from this Fall 2008 semester-long internship with the Speech Department at the New Beginnings school for autistic children. The introductory section will look at questions like: What is autism, what are some of the theories about what causes it, and what are some of the proposed treatments? Other sections will study what types of AAC devices/strategies are available--and do some work better for autistic children than others? How do people unfamiliar with AAC devices respond if someone interacts with them using a device? Do they respond normally, start addressing the device instead of the person, find themselves put off by the mechanical voice of a talker or the step-by-step process of having a sentence pointed out picture by picture? One question is based directly on personal experience—during my work with autistic children, visitors to the class would often make the mistake of assuming that because a child couldn't speak it meant he couldn't understand either. This was certainly not true in every case, and makes me wonder if American/Western societies in general often equate personhood and/or intelligence with language skills, and if so, what can be done to combat this tendency as the number of children diagnosed with autism rises.

My program of study at Simon's Rock has included a concentration in linguistics, and many of the courses I've taken have helped prepare me for this thesis topic, including Intro to Linguistics, Language and Culture, and Native American Languages with Nancy Bonvillain, and the Technology, Communication, and Language class I took at Trinity College Dublin. The First Language Acquisition tutorial with Anne O'Dwyer and Colette van Kerckvoorde during the Spring 2008 semester has also proved helpful, as well as the Biological Debates BA Seminar I recently took with Anne O'Dwyer and Bob Schmidt. In the past I have taken Cognitive Psychology and Cognitive Neuroscience with David La Berge, and these classes have also contributed to my understanding of both autism and language.



Using speech generating devices
to communicate during play