The Use of AAC to Reduce Challenging Behaviors in Children

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Abstract

This session will provide an overview of the use, benefit, and implementation of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) with children who present with challenging behaviors. The basic process of when to implement AAC will be discussed. There will be a brief review of literature regarding the benefit of AAC on students with challenging behaviors. Application of this knowledge in practice will also be discussed.

Introduction

There is no prerequisite for people who can benefit from the use of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC). People of varying ages, cognitive and linguistic abilities can use AAC and benefit from its use. AAC should be implemented for individuals whose speech is not an effective method of communication (Beukelman & Light, 2020). There are many things that can cause someone's speech or communication abilities to be ineffective. This can be anything from unintelligible speech from misarticulation to language impairments. This inability to effectively communicate can affect all areas of an individual's life. Oftentimes, children with a specific language impairment can struggle with their emotional regulation (Fujiki et al., 2002) and they can withdraw socially (Fujiki et al., 1999). Because AAC is a method of communication for those individuals (Beukelman & Light, 2020), it allows them opportunities to communicate in areas that they otherwise would not have. In the example of children that struggle with emotional regulation, AAC gives them the opportunity to communicate their emotions so they can receive the support that they need to regulate. In the example of children withdrawing socially, AAC gives them the opportunity to communicate with their peers during structured activities, unstructured play, and other social situations.

Definitions:

Augmentative & Alternative Communication (AAC): AAC is a method of communication used by people that cannot rely on their speech. AAC allows patients to use "any existing speech, in addition to vocalizations, gesture, manual signs, and aided communication." (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association [ASHA], n.d.-a).

Challenging Behavior: "Challenging behaviors can have the functions of requesting tangible objects, escaping tasks, requesting attention, meeting sensory needs, or combinations of these." ASHA, n.d.-b).

Functional Communication Training: A process of teaching functional and meaningful communication using differential reinforcement techniques to children with various developmental disorders (Tiger et al., 2008).

Current Literature

Various studies have been conducted showing the effect of AAC use on functional communication, and functional communication on challenging behaviors (Beukelman & Light, 2020; Drager et al., 2010). One of these studies describes Functional Communication Training (FCT) in order to allow children to express needs and wants, develop social closeness, exchange information, and fulfill social expectations (Drager, 2010). Beukelman and Light (2020) further discusses the use of AAC to develop functional communication. In this textbook, they highlight the importance of interventions that focus on positive behaviors in order to prevent challenging behaviors (Beukelman, 2020). A meta-analysis was conducted regarding the effect of AAC interventions on challenging behaviors. In this analysis they found evidence that AAC interventions had positive effects on challenging behaviors (Walker et al., 2013). According to Virginia Walker and Martha Snell (2013), "when the intervention for challenging behavior includes some approach for teaching individuals to communicate using AAC, the effects are likely to be positive (125)." Overall, this analysis concludes that AAC interventions should be applied in conjunction with FCT, after a functional behavior analysis has been conducted (Walker, 2013). The graph below shows before and after a picture exchange system was introduced to a student with challenging (disruptive) behaviors. This illustrates the relationship between disruptive behaviors and the number of pictures that were exchanged. It is evident by this graph that the use of AAC (picture exchanges) is related to decreasing disruptive behaviors (Frea et al., 2001).
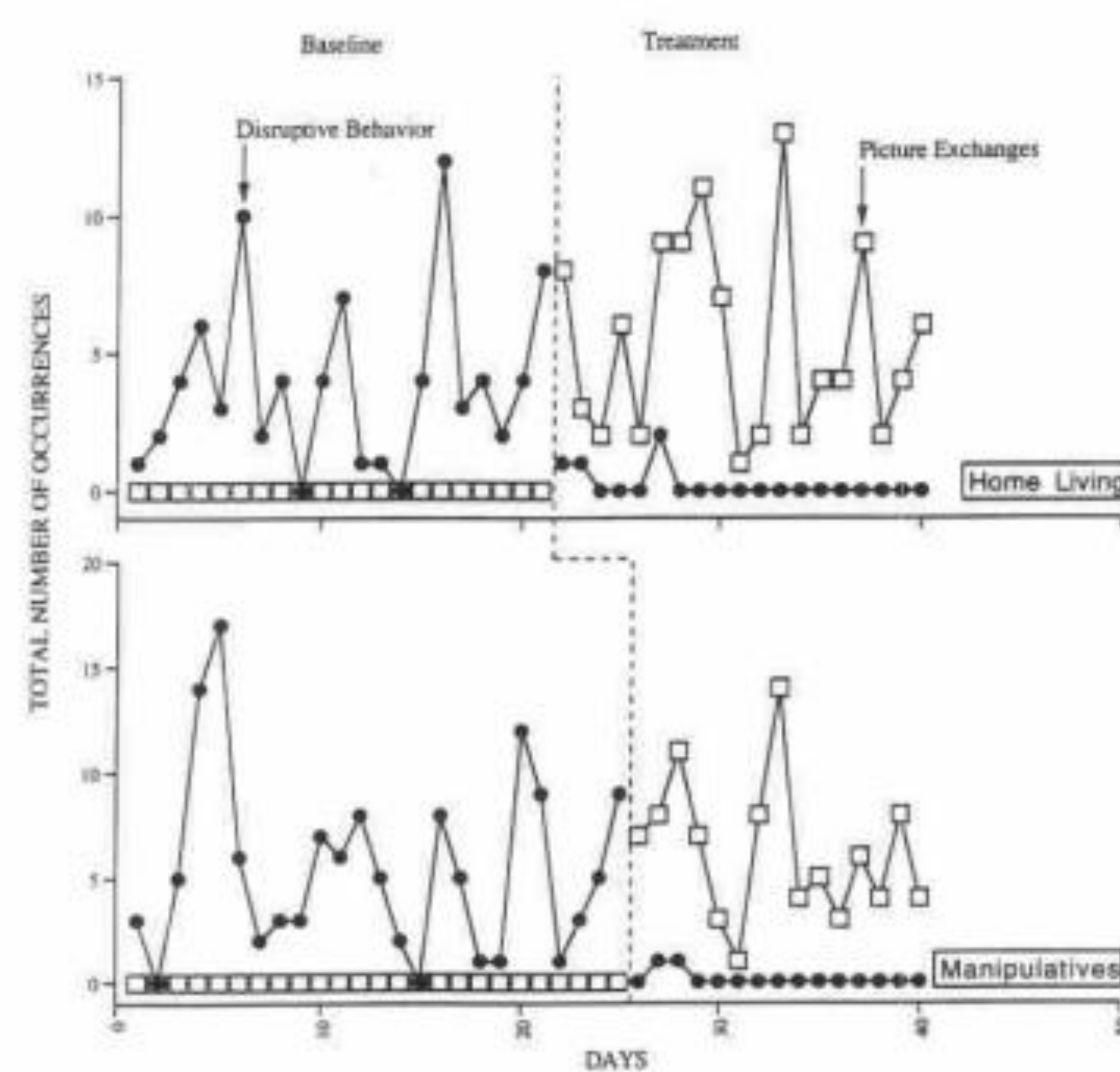

Figure 1. Number of occurrences of disruptive behavior and picture exchanges across classroom activities. (Frea, 2001)

More Research Needed

It has been established that functional communication through AAC can be implemented to help improve challenging behaviors (Drager et al., 2010; Frea et al., 2001), but what does this look like in implementation with SLP's and special educators? SLP's are specifically trained in teaching, using, and maintaining AAC devices/techniques (ASHA, n.d.-c). In school settings, SLP's have limited time to individually work with a student to teach AAC use as functional communication (Andzik et al., 2021). In order to make AAC use truly functional, and therefore decrease challenging behaviors, its use needs to be generalized into the classroom, then home settings. There has recently been research conducted that supports further training for special educators regarding functional communication training to reduce challenging behaviors in students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (Andzik et al., 2021). Specifically for children with ASD, generalization of new skills can be more difficult, making it even more important to have a well-rounded team approach to AAC/functional communication interventions (Andzik et al., 2021).

Application

In a journal published by The ASHA Leader (Downey et al., 2004), there are about 10 areas to implement AAC into a classroom setting. These include various classroom activities from specific, planned activities like literacy or math to more generalized classroom times such as arrival, departure, recess, and lunch. These are activities and ideas that can be easily implemented by a classroom teacher or paraprofessional to help generalize AAC skills into the classroom setting for functional communication (Downey et al., 2004). Having regular, short trainings regarding activities like these could help educators be more prepared to engage their students in functional communication, therefore reducing the incidence of challenging behaviors in their classrooms.

References