

## HOW-TO: Fostering Literacy with AAC Students

All children can learn to read when given systematic instruction, the appropriate tools and the opportunity. The act of reading requires the ability to match the string of letters on the page with the words that we speak and hear, and understand the words' meanings.

All children can learn to decode. Teaching reading is a little more challenging with students who use (or are learning to use) AAC to communicate—how do we know what they know, how can they practice the letter-sound connection, how can they practice blending?—but there are ways to work through this. AAC is not a closed door to literacy, nor is it a reason to wait. Literacy opens doors that are important for every person, but even more so for people with complex communication needs. As well, literacy can fuel the acquisition of more complex communication.

For the purpose of fostering literacy with our district's AAC students, we are looking at reading skills in the following three stages: **emerging**, **developing**, and **practicing**. All AAC students should be considered emergent readers (unless they have shown us they are further along in their reading journey), regardless of communication status, physical access skills, or assumptions on their cognition.

An independent development of some reading skills is common in many students with an Autism Spectrum diagnosis. When a student shows us they are already accessing meaning from print, we will request a consult from Heather Willms, the district reading specialist, in order to determine which reading building blocks have been developing, and which ones have been missed. Developing skills in the mechanics of reading is different than recognizing words as a by-product of exposure to words on a talker. (Continued exposure to environmental print and symbols is important but the value is not as a reading strategy but rather to develop vocabulary and the ability to access expressive language via a talker.)

### For Emergent Readers

1. All of our AAC students should be present for reading instruction in the class setting, both Jolly Phonics for phonics work and Heggerty for phonemic awareness.
2. A set of hands-on tools for decoding activities can be ordered from the print shop after consultation with Jennie and Heather. A list of interactive apps is available to support practice of this stage.