# Mobile Technology, Apps and AAC

Mobile technology is being used everywhere and by large numbers of people in everyday communication. Many individuals with disabilities are also using these mainstream devices in place of dedicated "high tech" AAC devices. This includes individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), brain injury, cerebral palsy, and by older adults, etc.

Mobile technology includes devices like smartphones, personal digital assistants (PDAs), e-readers, music players, gaming systems, touch tablets and personal computers. These are often used because they are less expensive than dedicated "high tech" AAC devices and are readily available off the shelf at local stores. They also offer user-friendly interfaces and are customizable to an individual's need. Other reasons mobile technology is as popular as AAC devices are because:
- They have a "coolness" factor – meaning they are seen as more normal looking than dedicated AAC devices. This means individuals are motivated to use them in all environments including the community.
- They are flexible, portable, motivating and engaging through the use of multimedia content and touch screen technology.
- They have longer battery life with some having up to 10 hours of use before they need to be recharged.
- They can be used with individuals of most any age as successful communication devices. This includes ages from toddlers to older adults.
- They are multipurpose and can be used for more than one activity unlike dedicated AAC devices.
- They have been shown to increase, maintain or improve communication and social interactions for many individuals with disabilities.
- They often are funded by the individual or family themselves so there is no waiting on letters of medical necessity or prescriptions from medical providers. *Note: Medicare/Medicate may not fund mobile technology because they are not dedicated speech-generating devices nor are they classified as durable medical equipment.*

Mobile technology consists of a mobile device (the hardware) and the mobile operating system (OS) that runs the application software (apps). Some of the most common OS include iOS from Apple, Android from Google, and Windows from Microsoft. In the ever-changing landscape of mobile devices, OS, and apps, it is hard to keep up with what's new. New apps and devices are being developed all the time. A list of today's devices and apps will be outdated within a few months. Take time to explore what's currently available on the market by doing an Internet search. Use a favorite search engine to find apps for Special Education, AAC, social life skills or ASD. Make sure to read the reviews before making a purchase. This will help to inform your choice.

Another avenue of exploration is to consult with professionals like speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, or teachers to get their advice on what's new, and most importantly, what works. Finally, consider exploring an Assistive Technology Act Program (ATAP) in your state. You can find a contact at:
<http://www.resnaprojects.org/allcontacts/statewidecontacts.html>. ATAPs provide:
- Information and Assistance
- Consultations and Technical Assistance
- Device Loan Program
- Training to the individual as well as caregivers

While there are many advantages to using mobile devices and apps for ACC, there are also some disadvantages. As mentioned above these are not always covered by Medicare funding or private insurance. Also, product warranty, customer support and training for use as an AAC may not be as robust as with a dedicated AAC device. For some individuals with fine motor challenges, this technology may be hard to use. Mobile devices may require additional equipment like special mounts for wheelchair use, special protective cases and screens to withstand breakage, and special speakers or headphones for use in noisy environments, switches and key guards, etc. This can add cost to the mobile device and should be a consideration when making a purchase.

When making a decision to purchase mobile technology for use as an AAC device careful consideration is the best approach. Here are some suggestions to help in the decision making process:

1. Use a team approach to identify:
    a. The needs of the individual
    b. The skills of the individual
    c. The environment where the device will be used
    d. The supports that are available to the individual for learning how to use and update the device and applications
    e. The financial resources available to the individual for purchase
2. Do an AAC assessment using a professional skilled in assessments to determine need and identify features needed for successful communication. Include at least the following information on:
    a. Current skills and needs of the individual
    b. Opportunities to interact with others
    c. Individual's interests
    d. Future needs
    e. Knowledge and skills of available communication partners
3. Explore devices and apps. Read both the description and reviews for both products.
4. Identify whether additional equipment will be needed. Such as:
    a. Speakers
    b. Mounts
    c. Carrying Case
    d. Screen protectors
    e. Switches
    f. Key guards

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