

# CAREGIVER AND DIRECT SUPPORT PERSPECTIVES ON HIGH-TECH AAC



**ASHA CE  
APPROVED PROVIDER**

Pennsylvania  
Speech-Language-Hearing  
Association

Intermediate Level

.1 ASHA CEUs

**SHANNON WELCH M.S. CCC-SLP  
AND ERIN EDWARDS BCBA**

## **Learning Objectives:**

- DESCRIBE key protective and risk factors that influence sustained use, abandonment, or refusal of high-tech AAC systems from the perspectives of natural supports and direct support professionals.
- EXPLAIN how interprofessional collaboration, particularly between SLPs and BCBAs, contributes to long-term high-tech AAC success.
- APPLY strategies to improve communication outcomes by incorporating input from natural and/or direct support professionals in high-tech AAC implementation..



## Course Abstract

Individuals with autism and intellectual disabilities who have limited vocal speech experience persistent barriers to communication. Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) systems, particularly high-tech AAC tools such as tablets and speech-generating devices, provide opportunities for effective communication. Consistent access to AAC has been shown to enhance quality of life, foster social engagement, increase community participation, and reduce frustration with communication breakdowns. Despite these benefits, device abandonment and rejection remain common, especially among individuals with complex communication and behavioral needs. Much of the existing research has focused on professional perspectives, primarily those of Speech-Language Pathologists (SLPs), clinicians, and educators. The voice of natural supports (e.g., parents, guardians, family, friends) and direct support staff (e.g., paraprofessionals, direct support professionals, registered behavior technicians) has been largely underrepresented despite the significant role they play. To address this gap, we conducted a national survey to explore protective and risk factors related to continued AAC use versus AAC abandonment from the perspective of natural and direct support staff. More than 1,500 respondents across all 50 U.S. states and territories participated, reflecting on their experiences supporting individuals with limited vocal communication. The outcomes from this study offer insight into factors that drive AAC maintenance and termination. These findings contribute to the growing body of literature emphasizing the importance of interprofessional collaboration, particularly between SLPs and Board-Certified Behavioral Analysts (BCBAs), in serving AAC users and their support networks. By listening to the people who know the AAC users best, we can better understand how to prevent device abandonment, promote sustained use, and build communication systems that can endure.

## **Speaker Bios**

Shannon Welch, MS, CCC-SLP is a Speech-Language Pathologist specializing in Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC). She provides AAC evaluations and therapy for individuals with autism, intellectual, and developmental disabilities. Shannon began her career in schools, building a foundation in Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA), and now works at the Functional Communication Clinic at Penn State Health Hershey Medical Center. She provides weekly co-treatments with a BCBA to support patients with complex communication and behavioral needs. Her research focuses on AAC service delivery, interdisciplinary collaboration, and creating practical tools for caregivers, educators, and support staff.

Erin Edwards is a Board-Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA), researcher and clinician at the Penn State Hershey Medical Center in Hershey, PA. She provides behavior analytic services to children and adults who have autism or other developmental disabilities, ranging from mild symptoms to more severe symptoms of the diagnosis. While at Penn State, Erin helped to develop a clinic service to provide co-treatment, from a BCBA and SLP, with a focus on AAC communication development. Erin is also interested in developing free and accessible tools for natural caregivers and direct care providers, to ensure that they have resources to support individuals with autism, providing learning opportunities across the lifespan.

## **Speaker Disclosures**

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