

# ACTIVE LISTENING

## A.K.A. 'NONOBLIGATORY RESPONSES'

**BACKGROUND:** Janice Light and Cathy Binger have provided a number of strategies for supporting AAC use in their excellent book, *Building Communicative Competence*. One strategy they suggest is to increase turn-taking. They review research that suggests that ". . . individuals who use AAC tend to take their obligatory turns in interactions (i.e., those that follow a partner's question) but tend to forfeit their nonobligatory turns (i.e., those that start a conversation or follow a partner's comment or statement)." (1998, p. 114). Light & Binger also report research indicating that, if responses are given relatively quickly, unfamiliar partners judged AAC users as being more competent communicators when they took obligatory turns (ex: What's your name? . . . Caroline) versus nonobligatory turns (ex: I have a big scab where I fell down . . . Yuck!). Therefore, they viewed increasing nonobligatory turns as an important goal for AAC users who have relatively efficient rates of communication. Remember that filling nonobligatory turns lets the partner know that the AAC user is: 1) interested in the conversation; 2) involved in the conversation; 3) a competent communicator. For the rest of this paper, the term 'active listening' will be used instead of 'nonobligatory responses,' as is more familiar and easily understood.

**CHOOSING VOCABULARY FOR ACTIVE LISTENING:** Users should be helped to choose at least one (preferably 2 or more) comments in these categories:

*Positive:* cool; awesome; that's great; wow; congratulations

*Neutral:* really; okay; huh; no kidding

*Negative:* oh no; yikes; get out; yuck;

These comments should reflect the personality of the person who uses AAC. Just as typical speakers change their 'favorite phrases' from time to time, people who use AAC should be helped to learn new phrases, or given a chance to 'switch out' comments.

**QUICK ACCESS TO COMMENTS:** Note that the research showed that users need to be able to respond relatively quickly when they are taking nonobligatory turns. That is because partners are not as willing to wait for comments as for answers to specific questions. This will be set up differently, depending on the device used, the access used, level of vocabulary, etc.



*Vanguard / Vantage: Use of Interjections*



*DynaVox Generic Chit Chat Page:  
Included on AAC in the Desert 04 CD -  
link to user's top page*

**STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING ACTIVE LISTENING:** Light & Binger (1998, pp. 126-135) offer very detailed, easy-to-follow ideas for teaching facilitators how to provide opportunities, and teaching individuals who use AAC to become more active listeners. Here is a summary of a few strategies that we have found helpful:  
**If Appropriate, Tell the AAC User WHY Active Listening is Important:** For individuals who understand the concept of research, briefly explain the results of research, so they will know that giving verbal responses will lead to better conversations!

**Model!** Use good modeling strategies - it is **CRUCIAL** that you use model using the AAC device. Also use 'think aloud's' to show why you're answering the way you are:

Example: Jake (friend - natural speaker) F: facilitator Kim: AAC User

Jake: I got a new Sponge Bob video.

F: 'Okay, Jake told me about his new video - I should say something so he knows I'm interested and keeps talking with me' . . .

F: (using AAC device) COOL

Mari: 'It's really funny.'

F: 'Now I should say something else so he'll stay and talk some more.'

F: Using AAC device. REALLY

**Practice:** Use the IntelliPics Studio file "Good News Walk" (on the Comm Circles CD) to practice responding.

**Role Play:** Set up Good News / Bad News situations - tell stories with good and bad things happening, and support AAC users in responding. Teach peers to be the story tellers.

**Natural Environment:** Be sure to move this to the natural environment as soon as possible!



*Good News Walk: IntelliPics Studio 3  
AAC-D 04 CD*