

OASIS · AT A GLANCE

Functional AAC for Adults: It's Not Too Late

How to introduce AAC in adulthood, choose goals that matter (pain, consent, real preferences, not the color of the cat), and work with SLPs who do adult work.

BY JIM PALASTY · OASIS FOR AUTISM · 9 MIN READ

0

ADULTS TOO OLD

Zero. AAC fluency develops at any age. The "critical period" framing is outdated. Adults who start at twenty-five do not learn worse than children who start at five.

How it works

THREE STEPS

Match tool to adult

Speech-generating device, tablet app, picture board, hybrid. The right starting point depends on current communication.



Goals that matter

Pain. Consent. Real preferences. Not "label the color of the cat" or "request a cookie." The right goals make AAC stick.



Real-world use

Restaurant, doctor, family dinner, work. Practice where language actually lives. SLP coaches, family backs the practice.

Adult AAC goals worth setting

Medical	"I have pain in [location]"; yes/no for procedures
Consent	"Yes," "No," "Not yet," "Stop"
Preferences	Food, clothes, activities, daily plans
Social	"I would like to come back next week," "Not now"
Emergency	"I need help," "Call my mom," "I am lost"
Identity	"My name is," "I am autistic," "I use AAC"
Boundaries	"Please do not touch me," "Give me a minute"

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

“

My brother started AAC at twenty-six. The first month he barely touched the tablet. The third month he ordered his own coffee at the place I had been ordering for him for twelve years. The sixth month he told a doctor where his stomach hurt without me translating. He is forty-one now. He uses the tablet every day. Someone told my mother in 1989 he was too old to start. They were wrong by thirty-six years and counting.

ELAINE, FLINT

What matters, at a glance

The "too late" myth

Adults who would have benefited from AAC for years sometimes do not get a device because someone said "too old" or "they would have learned by now." Both claims are wrong. The research and the practice both contradict them.

Adult vocabulary

Pediatric AAC often includes "snack" and "swing" but not "consent," "pain," "no thank you," "I need a break." Adult vocabulary needs adult words.

Goals that matter

Pain reporting. Yes/no for medical procedures. Choosing what to eat. Declining a request. Sharing an opinion. These motivate use. "Label the picture" goals do not.

SLP wait

Speech-language pathologists who specialize in adult AAC are scarce. Plan a six-week wait for an evaluation in many regions. Sometimes longer.

Hybrid is fine

Device for some situations, picture board for others, gesture for some. Fluent AAC users use multiple modes. So can new adult AAC users.

Burnout-aware pacing

Training intensity matters. Two hours of low-demand practice a week is often better than thirty minutes of pressured daily drill. Less is more.

BRING THESE · CHECK AS YOU GO

- | | |
|--|---|
| ☐ SLP evaluation completed | ☐ Adult-appropriate vocabulary loaded |
| ☐ Real-world goals set (pain, consent, preferences) | ☐ Practice in three different settings |
| ☐ Quarterly review on calendar | ☐ Maintenance routine (battery, software, replacement) |
| ☐ Backup low-tech version available | |

YOUR MOVE

Starting adult AAC

- 1 Schedule an SLP evaluation with a specialist in adult AAC, not pediatric.
- 2 Set goals that matter to the adult, not goals that look easy to measure.
- 3 Pilot the device or app for three months. Adoption signals are subtle.
- 4 Practice in real settings (restaurant, clinic, work), not only therapy rooms.
- 5 Adjust vocabulary, pacing, and goals every quarter based on actual use.

AAC is voice, not training. The adult who starts at thirty-six is still building voice at fifty. There is no expiration date.

RESOURCES NAMED IN THIS POST

oasisforautism.com · <https://oasisforautism.com>

Informational only. Not legal or medical advice. Verify current program rules before acting.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JP

Jim Palasty

Jim Palasty is the founder of OASIS for Autism and a single father of an adult autistic daughter in Michigan.