

Mentoring



For most of us, life is a journey.

Some of us have the trip all planned out and others are just looking to find the next rest stop. However we journey, it can be a better experience if we have guides along the way. Mentors can be very useful at guiding the way.

As we direct the spotlight toward mentoring, we find that mentoring changes its identity as it moves from place to place and program to program. The meaning of mentoring is just as slippery as that of independent living or empowerment.

What is mentoring?

A mentoring relationship consists of a person with more experience or more confidence in a specific area (a mentor) sharing what he or she knows and guiding someone who has less experience in that area (a protégé or mentee.)

In the broadest sense, our first mentors are our parents. As we grow up, our parents are not always able to mentor us in all our areas of need and interest, so we must seek out mentors with the experience or wisdom we desire.

Finding a mentor


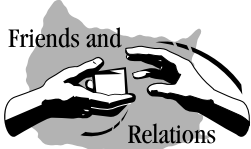



There is no limit to the kinds of things a person who relies on AAC might want a mentor for. Many areas of need or interest would be the same as anyone

else. If an augmented communicator is looking for guidance in becoming a respected amateur butterfly collector, he or she would look in the same places as anyone else. The big difference is that the collector with the disability must, as usual, take into account any physical or attitudinal barriers to acquiring a mentor. People can benefit from many mentors over a lifetime.

Each transition can be smoother with the help of a mentor. Falling in love, starting a new school, starting a new job, changing communities or homes, mastering a new skill, learning a new piece of assistive technology—all are easier and more fun if the experience can be shared with and guided by someone who has “been there.”

Mentoring and AAC

Finding mentors for needs and interests related to disability or AAC is more difficult. Attitudinal and physical barriers may not be a problem. Geographic and economic isolation often are the barriers that people must overcome to find mentors who have experience or confidence in these areas.

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Message from the author

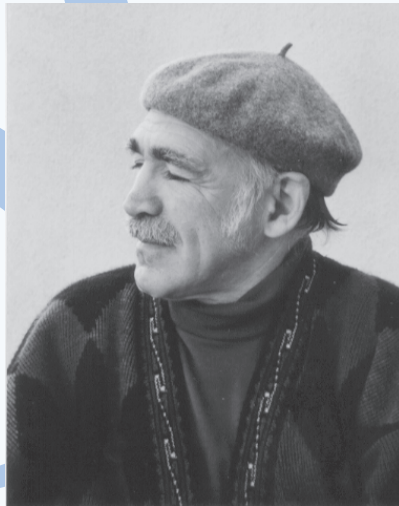
There's an old American adage that says nothing succeeds like success. But what is success?

Many people would define success in terms of material wealth and power. Other people would say that success is being able to do exactly what you want to do. Still others would say success is being able to sit and do nothing. In short, in the real world, there are as many definitions of success as there are people.

I've had many good mentors in my life. They have been as diverse as my interests. Among other things, they have shown me the ins and outs of baseball, revealed the mysteries of computing and taught me about the basic elements of AAC. All my mentors have had one thing in common: They gave me the tools I needed and got out the way to let me explore the subject for myself. Of course, they were available if I had questions or needed moral support.

My mentors were always able to transmit the love and joy they felt for their various areas of expertise to me.

AAC mentors have a tremendous opportunity to define success in a field where people are often viewed as incapable of success by society at large. If mentors can do that, that will be quite an accomplishment.



Kevin Cohen¹ is a graduate student in communication disorders at Penn State University who has been researching mentoring and AAC. He says that a mentoring relationship between two people who rely on AAC may help in managing “different situations, barriers, attitudes and opportunities that have been presented to them both as a result of their communication disability and their use and proficiency with their AAC system.”²

A mentoring relationship may also be a vehicle for passing information, developing skills, planning the future, trying new experiences, taking risks, gaining confidence, experimenting and envisioning possibilities. A mentor can motivate, challenge and encourage.

These are some areas where a person who relies on AAC may find a mentor to be useful:

- Strategies for independent living
- Relationship development
- Employment issues
- Education issues
- Self advocacy
- Personal assistant management
- Psychosocial issues
- Communication skill development
- Life goal planning

A good mentor

The theoretical foundation for mentoring comes from social learning theory. Kevin Cohen explained social learning theory to me this way: “People learn best when they are provided with a model which is perceived by the learner to have both prestige and qualities that are similar to them-

ALTERNATIVELY SPEAKING (ISSN 1075-3982) is published quarterly by Augmentative Communication, Inc., 1 Surf Way, Suite 237, Monterey, CA 93940. Telephone: (408) 649-3050. FAX: (408) 646-5428. One Year Subscriptions: By personal check U.S. & Canada=\$32 U.S.; Overseas=\$40 U.S.; Institutions: U.S. & Canada=\$48 U.S.; Overseas=\$57 U.S. Single Issues \$13. Special rates for consumers and full-time students. Periodicals Postage Paid at Monterey, CA. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to ALTERNATIVELY SPEAKING, c/o Augmentative Communication, Inc. 1 Surf Way, Suite 237, Monterey, CA 93940-3451.

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Author: Michael B. Williams
Technical Editor: Carole Krezman



selves. Research indicates that the most effective models are those

who are perceived as powerful, high in status, and similar to the observer.”³

A good mentor does not need to have all of life figured out, but there are some characteristics to look for in a mentor. Diane Bryen’s program, ACES⁴, utilizes graduates of ACES to mentor current participants. These are some of the qualities she finds useful in a mentor:⁵

- leads by example
- reflects on what he or she does
- shares
- listens
- knows when to step/wheel back to give the mentee opportunities to take the lead.

Hank Bersani⁶ at Oregon State University says, “ a good mentor has to be comfortable with who they are (having resolved most of those issues that plague a lot of us - it’s my fault, what did I do wrong, why me God...), and they need to have a good perspective on what they can and can not change about the mentee (protégé).”⁷ Bersani also suggests that “you can not lead someone through the maze if you have not conquered it yourself.”⁸

Does mentoring work?

Intuitively, mentoring makes sense, but there is very little research describing mentoring or establishing its usefulness. I found no research documenting the effectiveness of mentoring around disability issues or assistive technology use. There is not even any agreement about what mentoring

is. Perhaps just having the support of a “cheerleader” is enough to help many people get through transitions or learn new skills.

A caution

Mentoring is a hot concept right now. Grants are being funded. It took me a while to understand the excitement. Mentoring fits in well with the concepts of empowerment and self-advocacy, but I think the excitement of mentoring is driven by the fact that mentoring can be a cost saving measure.

Mentoring can be used to improve program outcomes or to provide services with very little money invested. Mentoring is done for free on clients’ or employees’ own time. Mentoring can be a way to shift responsibility for services back onto the client. Mentoring can be a way to shift responsibility for training onto the individual who needs to be trained. Mentoring can be a cloak that covers a loss of funding for critical programs.

Expectations of mentoring

Many times the best mentors appear out of the blue and disappear just as quickly: a short conversation with a neighbor at the post office, a “thumbs up” from a stranger, or a song on the radio that suddenly makes everything clear. We are grateful for these one-shot enlightenments and casual supports, and we don’t expect anything more. It is clear there is no contract or relationship.

A formal mentoring relationship is different. There are expectations. Often there are unobtainable expectations. Given the current state of knowledge about

mentoring’s effectiveness, I urge caution in entering a formal mentoring relationship. Caution just means paying attention.

Write down:

- your expectations.
- the responsibilities of each party.
- what activities will take place.
- when the relationship will end.
- how you will know if the mentoring was successful.
- what you will do next.

Remember, when you come across a passage on the road of life which you don’t want to navigate on your own, you can often find a mentor to guide you through that passage, and then go along on your own until the next tricky spot.

In the real world

Hank Bersani wrote me concerning three ways mentoring can go wrong:

- If a person with a need for multiple supports or interventions is given only a mentor, everyone will loose. The mentor will feel like a failure, the mentee will be blamed for not making progress when help was offered, and the mentoring program will be labeled ineffective.

- Mentoring is not a replacement for professional counseling. A mentor may help guide a person who has a problem with substance abuse or other self-destructive behavior, but mentoring is not an effective way to solve these problems.

- Mentors must be supported emotionally. Helper burnout is a problem for all helpers. Bersani

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recommends a book called *How Can I Help?*⁹ by Ram Das.

Model programs

Many mentoring programs attempt to match up mentors and mentees. This saves the mentee the job of learning how to find and then finding a mentor. This efficiency, while appearing to be helpful, may be another example of paternalism rearing its ugly head.

At conferences I observe younger and less experienced AAC users. I expect them to gravitate toward more experienced communicators. Some do. But the chosen mentors are not the ones I would have chosen for them. It is difficult for a third party to predict who will appear to be “powerful, high in status, and similar to the observer.” People have to find their own mentors.

A program could teach people how to find a mentor, support their search, provide mentor-finding opportunities, suggest mentoring activities, coach mentors, and then support any mentoring relationship which does develop.

Mentoring Activities

Typically, a mentor and mentee get to know each other a bit, and then discuss the purpose of their mentor relationship. They plan activities which will meet the goals of the mentee. Sometimes all communication is through e-mail or over the telephone. Sometimes they meet in person. A mentee might accompany a mentor on a challenging experience. A mentor who is too distant might provide support before and

after a new experience. A mentee is looking for a change, and the best way to make a change is to try it in the real world.

Learning from a mentor (being a good mentee)

The first step in being mentored is to be receptive to getting help and to learn. The next step is to act on that learning and change. Diane Bryen says, “A good mentee wants to learn, trusts others to be valuable resources and mentors, and realizes that we can always learn from others.”¹⁰

A good mentee is a receptive student who is eager to become a master.

Becoming a good mentor

As each of us master pieces of our lives, we can support our community by sharing that mastery with another person. Many of us who rely on AAC are trail blazers; we are the first (or only) ones to do many of the things we do.

As we master an area of our lives, it is important to go back and find someone else who would like to master the same thing. Of course, there is the obligation to support the community, but more importantly, when you teach someone what you know, there are now two of you blazing the trail rather than you by your self. **A**

The G

People who rely on AAC live in the shadow of two stereotypes of the disabled person. One is of the helpless cripple. Nothing is expected of him, and he doesn't expect anything of himself. He is doomed to failure by his attitude and the attitudes of those around him. On the other end of the spectrum is the “supercrip” for whom anything is possible if enough will power and effort is put into the task at hand.

Which model would you rather pattern yourself after? That's right, the supercrip. No one wants to be a helpless cripple. But the life of the supercrip is fraught with pitfalls. I know disabled people who are so busy playing the success game they have time for little else. Try to sit down with one of these people for a cup of coffee and some casual conversation and watch what happens. Pretty soon a beeper goes off or a cellular telephone rings, and it's time for the next meeting. These people are no fun.

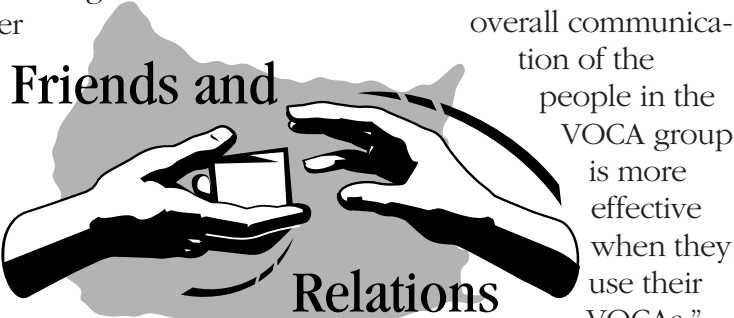
Some parents are fond of pushing a version of the supercrip on their disabled children. Once during a question and answer session with some parents, I found myself in the middle of a spirited debate with a gung-ho mother of a six-year-old son who

Good Life

used AAC. This parent was so intent on pushing her son academically that she was reluctant to let him play an occasional game of baseball because he wouldn't have time to do his homework. I tried to get her to look at the other side of the coin, to see that this young kid needed to have some fun and an opportunity to make friends. To become successful human beings, children who rely on AAC must be given the opportunity to pursue many kinds of activities and interests even at the risk of a less than perfect performance at school or in therapy.

Not too long ago I said, "Using AAC technology well is not the point; communicating effectively in natural circumstances is." Well, it is time to widen the view. Communicating effectively is wonderful, but the point is to live one's life.

I talked to Graciela Slesaransky-Poe¹¹ (via e-mail) about her research on the effectiveness of VOCAs. Slesaransky-Poe told me about three significant findings.¹²



First, "People with significant speech disabilities who use VOCAs consider their communication to be significantly more effective than people with significant speech disabilities who do not use VOCAs." Second, "The overall communication of the people in the VOCA group is more effective when they use their VOCAs."

These results validate current AAC doctrine. Slesaransky-Poe's third point is a bit startling. She asked, "Do people with significant speech disabilities who use VOCAs have a better quality of life than those people who don't use VOCAs?" And guess what, based on the instrument she used (QOL by Schalock) there is no significant difference in the quality of life of people who use and those who don't use VOCAs. She continues, "As you may know, there is a belief among many people that access to AAC automatically means better quality of life. Use of VOCAs may be necessary for becoming more independent, more included and more productive, but it is not sufficient! And this is a bitter

drink that we need to swallow. We can no longer claim that the use of VOCAs necessarily implies a better quality of life. The only claim we can make is that people who use VOCAs seem to communicate more effectively than those who don't use them."

A bitter drink, indeed.

How do children get the strength and desire to take on the world and become fully participating members of the society at large? Fostering a strong sense of self-worth in our sons and daughters is a start. Encouraging self determination gives them a compass to the future. Showing them a variety of possibilities gives them dreams to choose from. As children grow and change, exposing them to potential AAC mentors can play an important role. AAC mentors can give children a sense of community and provide role models, as well as impart visions of the future. While it is not possible to predict what will work for a particular individual, I suspect that those of us who have had mentors along the way are more likely to step up to the plate and knock in some runs. *S*



How does mentoring theory become practice? At the Pittsburgh Employment Conference (PEC),¹³ disability activist Carole Krezman presented a series of suggestions for ways individuals and organizations could help augmented communicators gain experience in leadership. Ms. Krezman's comments generated much comment at PEC. I hope it does the same for our readers.

Keys To Leadership

Ways To Mentor Yourself Without Much Money

- Read about or listen to what's going on in the disability rights movement.
- Read about or listen to what other augmented communicators write.
- Create opportunities to talk with other people with disabilities.
- Get on ACOLUG.¹⁴ (at school? at work? at ATA center? at UCPA affiliate?)
- Give yourself opportunities to practice being in charge of things, in your life, in your environment, in your neighborhood, at school, at church.
- Watch how groups work. Sit in on committee and board meetings. Some are on local cable TV.
- Join an organization that is active in your community and go to the meetings and events.
- Tell people how you feel about stuff.
- Learn to face unpleasant situations.
- Talk to someone you don't know every day.
- Speak up in class or at work every day.

Ways Individuals Can Help Augmented Communicators Become Leaders

- Create organized and informal situations where peers can mentor peers.
- Be competent in your work and treat your clients/customers with respect.
- Look for opportunities to give augmented communicators leadership responsibilities.
- Encourage augmented communicators to do things on their own.
- Allow augmented communicators to make mistakes.
- Insist that your organizations put augmented communicators in positions of power.

Ways Organizations Can Help Augmented Communicators Become Leaders

- Provide information about rights, leadership techniques, management techniques, group process, conflict resolution, traveling, how to handle oppression and adversity.
- Provide one-on-one support for committee/board members who need readers/explainers.
- Set up pre-meetings where augmented communicators can discuss issues and plan strategies before events, conferences, and meetings.
- Offer leadership opportunities to augmented communicators when they are very young.
- Set up leadership training programs similar to ACES.¹⁵
- Organize parent-free leadership training for young augmented communicators led by adult peers.
- Identify and train counselors that can provide support to people who get bogged down in the struggle.
- Do whatever needs to be done to get augmented communicators to conferences where they can meet their peers, learn about best practices and see policy being made.



Charles, Jackie and Me

Mentors come from unexpected places when you're a kid of nine. My first mentor was a sports-crazy adolescent named Charles who had cerebral palsy but was ambulatory. He sported double hearing aids and had a thick dysarthric accent. Charles taught me the rules of baseball, the strategy of baseball and how to keep score during a game. He told me which publications to read, which radio stations to listen to, which teams to root for (and not to root for), and which baseball board games were worth the money to buy. In short, Charles taught me to love baseball with a passion.

Charles and I lived in Los Angeles. We grew up in an age when Major League Baseball consisted of sixteen teams located east of the Mississippi River. We rooted for the Los Angeles Angels of the Pacific Coast League, a farm team of the Chicago Cubs. News of real baseball—Major League Baseball—came to us via radio, more often than not in the form of games recreated in a local studio by a staff announcer who would follow the progress of the game

by teletype. This method only gave minimal details of the game, so the announcer would spice up the action by adding details of his own creation to the game's narrative. This made the feats of Musial, DiMaggio, Williams, etc. all the more godlike to a kid experiencing his first baseball season.

All this happened in the summer of 1947, the year Jackie Robinson first played with the Brooklyn Dodgers and smashed Major League Baseball's color line. Robinson scarcely made an impression on me, but a small incident in October changed all that.

It was nothing really, just an observation I made at lunch one afternoon at school. The janitor sat under a tree listening to the World Series. He was hunched over a portable radio, eyes closed, hands balled into fists. "Com'on, Jackie, com'on Jackie," he whispered through clenched teeth. Although I didn't grasp the full significance of this scene until much later in life, I knew I was seeing something much more

than a man rooting for a baseball player.

The memory of this observation has been with me fifty years. As I grew up, I started to realize the true significance of Robinson's accomplishment. When Robinson stepped on the field that summer of 1947, he drove the first nail into the coffin of legal segregation in the United States.

Although I never met him, I've always considered Jackie Robinson a mentor. Jackie Robinson has been a source of inspiration and courage for me in my work as a disability activist. He understood that what he was doing went far beyond the bounds of sports, and he did his job with a coolness that belied the great physical and emotional risks he was taking. I think he would understand why his life means so much to me and why I am so dedicated to advancing the cause of augmented communicators everywhere. **A**

About Mentoring

When a young person asks an older person to share what he or she knows about something, that's mentoring. It might be a big question or a small question, but the important thing is that the younger person asks about what he or she wants to know. Some young people don't need or want mentors. Some want mentors just sometimes.

I asked some young people from Colorado this question:

"What have adults told you that helped you the most?"

This is what they said:

"Stay in school." Emily, age 13

"How to read." JB, age 9

"It is a difficult question. I can do everything."
A.L.S., age 9

Send me a fax or e-mail and tell me how you would improve your communication system.



The next issue will be about using telephones.

What is the best thing that you do with a telephone?

You can write to me: Michael Williams, Augmentative Communication Inc., One Surf Way, Suite 237, Monterey, California 93940.

You can send me a fax at (408) 646-5428.

You can send me electronic mail at mbwill@well.com

Sources & Resources

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email: graciela@ASTRO.OCIS.TEMPLE.EDU
215-204-1356, 800-204-7428.
- For information about her research, contact Graciela Slesaransky-Poe, PhD. at the above address.
- Information about the Pittsburgh Employment Conference for Augmented Communicators can be obtained from SHOUT, P.O. Box 9666, Pittsburgh, PA 15226.
800-934-4391.
- To join ACOLUG, e-mail Graciela Slesaransky-Poe at graciela@astro.ocis.temple.edu
- See Note 4 above.