tobii dynavox

AAC Myths

Myth

Stimming (self-stimulating) behaviors are disruptive and interfere with the effective use of AAC.

Fact

Stimming can help people regulate their senses and emotions, improving their mood, focus, and motivation (Haas, 2021).

What is stimming?

Self-stimulating behavior (stimming) usually involves repetitive movements or sounds such as spinning, flapping hands, rocking, or repeating the same sounds. These stereotyped or repetitive motor movements are core features in the diagnosis of autism. Stimming is a self-soothing mechanism in response to feelings of anxiety or environmental stimuli. Stimming is not a bad thing, and it's common in conditions like ADHD or anxiety. Even neurotypical people can exhibit stimming-like behaviors like tapping their foot or clicking their pen.

Supported by a growing body of scientific research, autistic adults argue that stimming may serve as a useful coping mechanism. This research is helping reshape how others view stimming (Kapp et al, 2019).

The evolution of research on stimming

Historically, stimming was considered a self-stimulatory act that shuts out external stimuli and interferes with the person's (and others') focus. Some theorized that these self-stimulatory acts were voluntary. Children with stimming behaviors were often introduced to treatments that focused on modifying, reducing, or eliminating them (Lanovaz et al., 2013).

Newer research looking into the perspective of autistic adults suggests that stimming is something that allows individuals to manage overwhelming sensory and environmental stimuli as well as cognitive and emotional distress (Kapp et al., 2019). Charlton et al., (2021) conducted research looking specifically at the experience and perspective of autistic adults relating to stimming. Autistic adults report that stimming provides a soothing rhythm that helps them cope with distorted or overstimulating perception and resultant distress (Davidson, 2010) and can help manage uncertainty and anxiety (Joyce, Honey, Leekam, Barrett, & Rodgers, 2017). There is a growing push for the acceptance of stimming as a practical self-regulation tool (Kapp et al., 2019; Kim & Bottema-Beutel, 2019; Orsini & Smith, 2010).

Types of stimming
Stimming can be categorized by the senses that are involved most prominently (Madel & Hayes, 2023).

Vestibular
Involves movement and balance

- Rocking
- Spinning
- Jumping
- Pacing
- Swaying
- Swinging
- Climbing

Proprioceptive
Involves weight and awareness of body in space

- Rocking
- Bouncing
- Spinning
- Jumping
- Pacing
- Rolling
- Applying pressure to body

Tactile
Involves touch and feel

- Rubbing the skin with hands or objects
- Scratching
- Stroking fabrics or objects with different textures

Visual
Involves vision and sight

- Staring or gazing at objects such as ceiling fans or lights
- Repetitive blinking or turning lights on and off
- Moving fingers in front of the eyes
- Hand flapping
- Eye tracking or peering from the corners of the eyes
- Object placement, such as lining up objects

Auditory
Involves hearing and sound

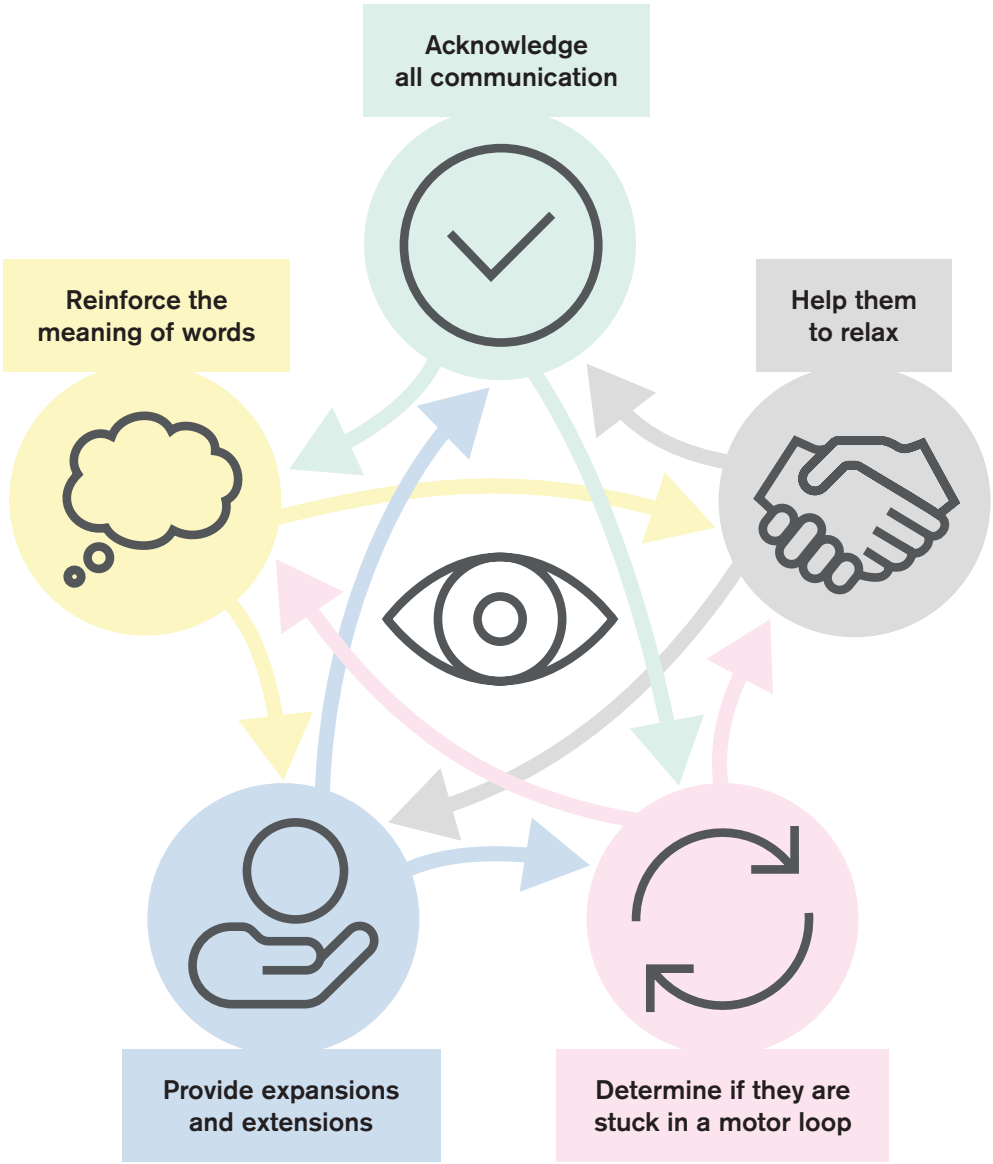
- Humming
- Tapping on objects or ears
- Covering and uncovering ears
- Finger snapping
- Repeating the same words or phrases
- Listening to the same song on repeat
- Clapping

Stimming and AAC

Now, let's reconsider stimming in relation to AAC. Some people think that stimming indicates that an individual is not using their device functionally (Madel, n.d.). However, stimming can have a place in functional AAC use. Some stimming behaviors can be part of the AAC and language learning process. Other times, it may be an indicator that the individual needs a sensory break and support with self-regulation. The key is to observe the purpose of the behavior in context and respond appropriately to support the individual.

General guidance to support different kinds of stimming

The first step is always to observe to understand why the person is stimming. Our purpose is not to stop the stimming, but to support the person in their language journey and self-regulation. The following table can help you figure out why the person is stimming, but if you are unsure, try the following:



How can we support AAC users without taking away access to communication? (Madel & Hayes, 2023)

Types of Stimming with AAC	Why they do this	What it can look like	Ways to support
Exploration or Babbling	People who do this are often exploring and learning how to use language. Babbling is an important stage in language acquisition. They learn that their babbled words have meaning from the responses of their communication partners.	▪ Not looking at device during use ▪ Making quick/random selections ▪ Switching between random pages ▪ Using device as an activity instead of for communication	▪ Follow their lead ▪ Model ▪ Attribute meaning to what they say and respond accordingly
Picking Specific or Preferred Vocabulary	People often enjoy certain sounds or topics. Ignoring or discouraging the repeated use of specific words can lead to a negative association with AAC. Instead, it is important to acknowledge their communication and build off their preferred vocabulary.	▪ Selections appear off-topic ▪ Frustration when they can't locate preferred words ▪ Can seem to be stuck on the same words	▪ Acknowledge their preferences and build off this language ▪ Provide expansions and extensions ▪ Observe to see if they are stuck in a motor plan
Echolalia/Scripting	This could either be a form of stimming or evidence that the person is a Gestalt Language Processor, meaning they learn language through chunked phrases, rather than using and combining single words. Gestalts are not stimming, but rather the way they communicate.	▪ Copying phrases ▪ Highly motivated by video or audio clips ▪ Quickly navigating to find intended phrases or vocabulary	▪ Work closely to discover the communicative intent, rather than removing phrases or ignoring the scripted language ▪ If using Gestalts, figure out their communicative intent ▪ Offer language models based on Natural Language Aquidition Framework stage
Self-Stimulation/ Dysregulation	People may use the auditory output of the device to assist with self-regulation. If the person is dysregulated, it is important to support this first.	▪ Holding device up to ear or turning up volume ▪ Selecting random words ▪ Demonstrating other signs of dysregulation	▪ Observe needs and support regulation ▪ Build in sensory breaks

Additional ideas to support

- Use Guided Access on an iPad. Guided Access limits an iPad to a single app and lets you focus their device use to communication. For more information about Guided Access, visit the Apple support page and search for 'guided access tips.'
- Have both light-tech and high-tech AAC available as options.
- Write a social narrative outlining the purpose of their AAC device.
- Train staff on using appropriate implementation strategies.
- Build breaks into the schedule that allow for AAC vocabulary exploration and sensory breaks.

Summary

Stimming is not necessarily an impediment to effective use of AAC. Stimming behaviors can actually be communication, a step in the language learning process, or a way to cope with their environment and regulate themselves (Haas, 2021). We support the effective use of AAC by responding appropriately to stimming, not by trying to stop it.

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