

# Black children with complex communication needs face instructional deficits

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Early childhood is a critical period for language development. For children with complex communication needs, support and training during this period of life can be essential for the development of

effective communication skills. Unfortunately, the services that children need may not be available to everyone equally. New research led by Penn State has revealed that Black children with complex communication needs receive less of a critically important type of instruction than their white counterparts.

Previous research has consistently shown that Black [children](#) in the United States systematically encounter barriers to accessing the same educational opportunities as their white peers. In a new article in *American Journal of Speech Language Pathology*—authored by Lauramarie Pope, doctoral candidate in communication sciences and disorders, and Janice Light, professor of communication sciences and disorders, Hintz Family Endowed Chair in Children's Communicative Competence at Penn State—the researchers found this same inequity occurs in augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) instruction for young children.

## **Augmentative and alternative communication**

According to the researchers, the term "complex communication needs" refers to any condition where people cannot meet their communication needs using only speech. Among children with complex communication needs, 70% have been diagnosed with a developmental delay or autism spectrum disorder. For people with complex communication needs, AAC can facilitate more accurate and expansive communication.

AAC can include any device or technique that people use to support or replace speech. In recent years, tablets, like iPads, and other [technological advances](#) have increased the set of AAC tools available, allowing children with complex communication needs to select icons or words from a display or to spell words that the device repeats out loud. These technological advancements have greatly expanded the accessibility of communication supports among children with complex

communication needs.

Proper training with AAC can literally transform a child's ability to communicate. Research has shown that, during preschool and lower elementary school, access to AAC-based instruction is critical to support a child's participation in school, social development, and communication, and impacts their outcomes later in life.

## **The racial divide in opportunities**

The researchers—conducted in collaboration with Amber Franklin, associate professor of speech pathology and audiology at Miami University—examined two waves of publicly available data about for 78 children with complex communication needs. One wave was collected during preschool, and another wave was collected two years later. At both times, teachers reported the amount of AAC-based instruction each student received per week. At the start of the study, 63% of white students received 90 minutes or more of AAC-based instruction each week. This level of instruction, however, was reported for only 29% of Black students.

"Without access to AAC at an early age, children with complex communication needs have no effective way to communicate and are severely restricted in their participation in education, family life, and community activities," said Light, who co-authored the article. "They are at risk in all aspects of development and fall further and further behind their peers. Early AAC instruction is essential to enhance communication, bolster language learning, increase participation in daily activities, improve speech, and decrease the challenging behaviors that occur when children are unable to communicate."

By the end of the study, the amount of AAC instruction that children were receiving was even lower. Two years after they were first measured

in preschool, 52% of white students received 90 minutes or more of AAC-based instruction each week. This level of instruction was reported for only 25% of Black students.

Troublingly, said the researchers, 75% of Black children were receiving fewer than 60 minutes per week of AAC instruction by the end of the study. Prior research has shown that at least 60 minutes per week is needed to address these students' needs.

"It is widely understood among researchers that racial disparities in [educational opportunities](#), instruction and outcomes are very common," said Pope, who was lead author of the article. "It was not surprising that the same pattern emerged in the use of AAC. These data fit the pattern that has been seen across educational fields. That being the case, we decided that it was time to sound the alarm bell, so to speak."

## **A call for self-examination**

The article provides specific recommendations for practitioners, administrators, researchers, preservice preparation programs and professional organizations. Specifically, the researchers suggest that professionals who provide services to young students with complex communication needs, as well as the organizations that train them, audit their programs to see if any racial imbalance exists in the services they provide. An audit, according to the researchers, would not take much time or money, but it could help identify opportunities to improve the equity of services.

"Most speech language pathologists and educators truly want to serve all children equally," said Pope. "Hopefully, these findings inspire practitioners to examine their work in order to identify any racial discrepancies. Understanding whether a problem exists is the first step toward fixing that problem."

Pope said that the researchers wrote the article to raise awareness about racial inequities in access to services for students that use AAC. The researchers said they believe that if the professionals and organizations undertake these equity audits, it could be a step toward educational equity for all children, which could lead more children to clear and effective [communication](#) throughout their lives.

**More information:** Lauramarie Pope et al, Black Children With Developmental Disabilities Receive Less Augmentative and Alternative Communication Intervention Than Their White Peers: Preliminary Evidence of Racial Disparities From a Secondary Data Analysis, *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1044/2022\\_AJSLP-22-00079](#)

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