Empowering AAC Users Through Access to Taboo, Slang, and Sexual Health Vocabulary

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Why This Matters

Every person has the right to full, authentic self-expression. For AAC users, this includes access to words that:

- Express strong emotions (e.g., frustration, humor, anger)
- Describe their bodies and health accurately
- Participate in conversations with peers (including slang)
- Assert boundaries and communicate about consent

Without these words, AAC users may be silenced, infantilized, or left vulnerable to abuse.

Key Principles

1. Freedom of Expression
Swear words, slang, and body vocabulary are a normal part of human communication.

2. Communication Rights
The Communication Bill of Rights protects every person's right to say what they want, when they want.

3. Respect for Autonomy
AAC users should decide what vocabulary is included in their systems.

4. Context Matters
Support responsible social use. Just like speaking peers, AAC users can learn when, where, and how to use different types of language.

Did You Know?

- **Swearing can reduce pain.** In one study, people tolerated icy water longer when swearing (Stephens et al., 2009).
- **Swearing helps emotional regulation** and activates the brain's fight-or-flight center (amygdala).
- **Children with disabilities are 2.27x more likely** to be sexually victimized than their nondisabled peers (Amborski et al., 2022).
- **Only 28% of AAC users who experienced abuse reported it to police** (Nelson et al., 2003).

What to Include in AAC Systems

- **Body parts** (penis, vulva, anus, breast, clitoris)
- **Consent words** (no, stop, don't touch, I don't like that)
- **Slang and peer talk** (e.g., "that sucks," "fart," "balls," "boobs")
- **Swear words** (if the User wants them)
- **Safe/unsafe language** (secret, surprise, hurt, tell someone)
- **Emotional expressions** (angry, pissed, overwhelmed, excited)

Tips for Teams and Caregivers

- **Ask the user** what words they want.
- **Model the words** without shame or censorship.
- **Discuss social use**—not all words are for every place.
- **Provide specific folders** or toggle options if needed.
- **Educate partners**: discomfort is not a reason to remove words.

AAC users deserve tools that reflect their full humanity. Let's give them the words they need to be heard, understood, and safe.

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Ethical Decision-Making for Including Vocabulary in AAC Devices

Step	Question	Yes	No
1	Is the vocabulary (e.g., swear word, slang, sexual health term) requested by the AAC user or caregiver, or essential to their expression?	✅ Include it in the system. Respect autonomy and authentic expression.	Proceed to Step 2
2	Is the vocabulary developmentally appropriate or necessary for advocacy/safety (e.g., consent, body awareness, abuse disclosure)?	✅ Include it. Educate the team and model socially responsible use.	Proceed to Step 3
3	Is the vocabulary being excluded based on the clinician's personal discomfort or beliefs (e.g., moral, religious)?	⚠️ **STOP.** This may violate ASHA's Code of Ethics. Reassess your reasoning and consult with peers or ethics board.	✅ Proceed with collaborative decision-making and documentation.

Guiding Reminders

- **ASHA Code of Ethics**: Clinicians must support autonomy, informed choice, and non-discriminatory service delivery.

- **Communication Bill of Rights**: Everyone has the right to say what they want, including strong emotional or socially taboo language.

- **Best Practice**: Always default to inclusion unless there's a user-centered, team-consensus-based, documented reason not to.

Please use this tool in IEP/504 planning, caregiver education, and professional training to uphold ethical, equitable AAC practices.