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## Specialized AAC Vocabulary

by Johana Swartz

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In order to be successful in adult roles, such as work or marriage, people need to be able to “talk the talk.” That is, they need to know how to use words that apply to specific contexts. In marriage and other personal relationships, certain words inevitably come up in conversation: date, single, fiancée, partner, sex, pregnancy, intimacy, privacy, birth control. Adults who communicate with devices that contain stored vocabulary will want such words available in their devices for easy access, so that they, too, can “talk the talk.”

Yet, the three most popular AAC symbol sets lack most of such words. In 1996, Dr. Diane Bryen, a partner in the Rehabilitation Engineering and Research Center for Communication Enhancement (AAC-RERC), and Bonnie Moulton, a graduate student at Temple University, found that Unity (Prentke Romich Company), Picture Communication Symbols (Mayer-Johnson), and Dynasyms (Dynavox) contain only 5-17% of words commonly used to express intimacy in a variety of personal relationships. Dr. Bryen concludes, “There is a need for vocabulary that is relevant and reflects socially valued roles of adults who use AAC.”

In response to this finding, Dr. Bryen, along with co-investigators Kevin Cohen and Rosangela Boyd, all of Temple University, launched the AAC-RERC project, “Specialized AAC Vocabulary Research”, as part of its second funding cycle. The goal of the research is to create vocabulary sets that enable people who use these three systems to speak their minds in a variety of adult situations. So far, a word list for employment has been completed and is available to view or download at <http://aacvocabulary.com>. Specialized vocabulary of interest to college students is now in development. Coming up next is a vocabulary set relevant to people in intimate relationships, such as marriage. Other categories to be addressed are raising children, managing personal care and reporting criminal incidents.

Watch the ACOLUG listserv for the opportunity to assist in developing the word lists. For each of the word lists, Dr. Bryen and her team will be recruiting three focus groups to participate in a series of on-line conversations. For example, three focus groups will work on vocabulary related to personal relationships and sexuality. One of the focus groups will be composed of six to eight adults who use communication devices and who are or have been involved in intimate relationships. A second group will consist of six to eight adults without disabilities with experience in intimate relationships. A third group will consist of professionals who are experts on the subject, such as doctors or psychologists.

Each focus group will brainstorm to generate a comprehensive list of vocabulary used in the context of marriage or intimacy. Words that appear on all three lists will become part of the final vocabulary set. Dr. Bryen and her team will design symbol sets for these words that are consistent with the patterns used in products sold by Prentke Romich Company, Mayer-Johnson and Dynavox. The symbol sets will be offered to the manufacturers to include in their systems’ vocabularies. The sets will also be available to the public, as they are completed, at <http://aacvocabulary.com>. Check this website regularly for newly posted

vocabulary sets.

**Article notes:**

1. The [AAC-RERC](#) is funded by the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research
2. "Why 'Employment, Independence, Marriage and Sexuality?' Because...We Want It All!," Diane Nelson Bryen and Bonnie M. Moulton, <http://aacvocabulary.com>
3. Johana Schwartz may be contacted at [Johana.Schwartz@stanfordalumni.org](mailto:Johana.Schwartz@stanfordalumni.org)
4. To join the ACOLUG listserv, follow the directions at <http://listserv.temple.edu/archives/acolug.html>

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