

**NAME:** Lauren Zaylskie, lauren.e.zaylskie@vanderbilt.edu

**PI:** Biggs Elizabeth

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### ***AAC in the PICU***

**Authors:** Lauren E. Zaylskie, Elizabeth E. Biggs, Kaitlyn J. Minchin

**Introduction:** The pediatric intensive care unit (PICU) is a frightening, and stressful environment for children and their family members. Many children and youth who are admitted to the PICU have severe communication vulnerabilities, compounding stress and uncertainty. Such children may have complex communication needs prior to their admission associated with a neurodevelopmental disability. Other children may need communication supports as a result of a medical condition or procedure, such as surgery involving the face or throat, or intubation. If a child is unable to communicate, it may not only be emotionally frightening for children and their family members, but can also increase risk for sentinel events. All children need a way to be able to communicate effectively with others around them in the hospital setting, and hospital staff need effective ways to support children's sense of control and enable them to participate actively in their care in developmentally appropriate ways. Aided augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) refers to communication supports such as communication boards, switches or buttons with speech output, eye gaze systems, and speech-generating devices that can provide such support, but little research has been conducted on the use of AAC in the PICU. As a critical next step, this research will investigate the perspectives of parents and hospital staff about AAC use, its impact on child and family stress and well-being, and contextual determinants surrounding effective AAC utilization in the hospital setting.

**Methods:** This research study involves seeking to understand the views and experiences of nursing staff in the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit (PICU) at VUMC, and the parents or caregivers of children and youth who used AAC during a PICU stay. This engagement with two key stakeholder groups will produce knowledge that can result in better communication, make an important difference in the experience of young patients, and lead to better patient outcomes.

**Keywords:**

Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC), Pediatric Intensive Care Unit (PICU)