

The Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)

What is it?....

- ★ The picture exchange communication system is a method of teaching early communication skills to children with language and communication difficulties.
- ★ It was developed in the USA by psychologist, Andrew Bondy, and speech and language therapist, Lori Frost.
- ★ PECS was developed for use with pre-school children with autistic spectrum disorders but it is now used with children and adults with a range of needs.
- ★ As children with social communication difficulties may not be motivated by social rewards such as praise, communication skills are taught using very motivating rewards, for example bubbles, food, noisy toys.
- ★ Central to PECS is the idea of getting children to use a symbol to ask for something they want. At first, they are physically prompted to do this by a silent prompter.
- ★ Verbal prompts must not be used because children become dependent on them and do not learn to communicate spontaneously.
- ★ PECS is a small step approach that leads the child through early stages of communication.

Examples of PECS motivators

Motivators must be toys or food rewards that the child really wants. You should start with a choice of several motivators to see what the child will reach for.

Motivators should be changed as soon as the child loses interest.

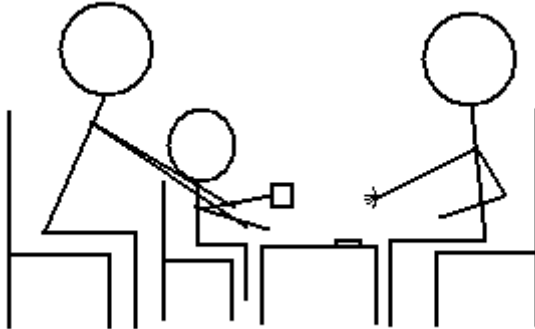
When the child becomes more confident with using PECS, specific motivators are faded out and PECS is used throughout the day during normal daily routines.

Examples of Early Motivators:

- ★ Food – Small pieces of biscuit, crisps, sweets, cereals, fruit, raisins, any favourite food.
- ★ Drink – Small sips of favourite drink.
- ★ Noisy Toys – Music, switch toys, drums, shakers, whistles, balls with bells, any toy that makes a noise.
- ★ Favourite Toys – E.g. Disney toys, Thomas, Tweenies.
- ★ Visual Toys – Bubbles, balloon and balloon pump, spinning tops, helter skelter.
- ★ Tactile Toys – Furry toys, squeeze balls.
- ★ Games – Tickles, bounces, spinning, 'raspberry'.

PECS stage 1: Exchange

★ Exchange:



- 1) For “exchange” you need two adults.
- 2) The child sits at a small table with the adult behind, as above.
- 3) Put one symbol on the front of the file at a time. Choose the symbol for the motivator you will be using. Do not let the child play with the file at other times, it needs to be used for requesting only.
- 4) Show the item that you think interests the child. For example if you know the child is thirsty then put a small amount of drink in a cup and let him/her taste it, or show the balloon pump and let him/her have a turn for free.
- 5) Then take the toy/food etc away and hold it where it can be easily seen. **Do not say anything at all!!** When the child reaches for it, the person sitting behind should direct his/her hand down to the symbol and help him/her to hand it over to the adult.

N.B: The adult sitting behind should **say nothing at all**. It is important always to wait until the child has reached for the thing that is desired **before** you physically help him/her pick up the symbol. The aim is that the child starts off the whole interaction by reaching!

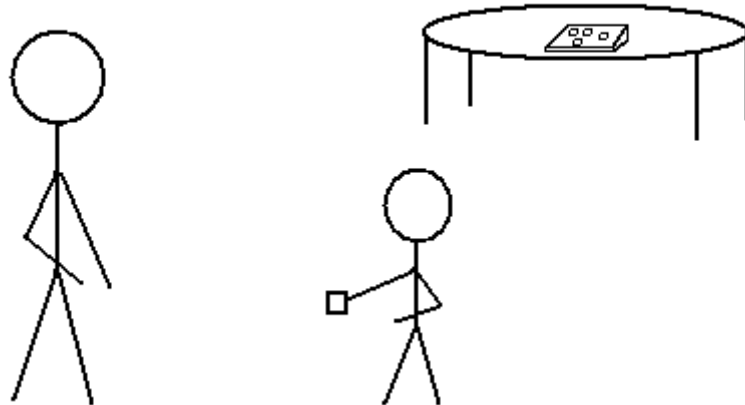
- 6) The person receiving the symbol should take it when the child offers it, and say the name of the thing (you could hold out your hand as a clue but be aware all prompts need to be phased out quickly). You can then praise the child and hand over the item they want. Make sure you do this as quickly and smoothly as possible.
- 7) Lots of practise will be needed so do this as many times as you can.

- 8) For any toys or food that you use, you will need to always do the symbol exchange with them so that the child learns she/he can only get these things by handing over a symbol. If the child is free to have them whenever they want without asking they will not bother to learn PECS because they won't need to.

Without Physical Assistance:

- ★ The child needs to hand the symbol over to the adult without a physical prompt. This will probably be achieved gradually.
- ★ You should stop holding your hand open to receive the symbol. Instead, expect the child to pester you more with the symbol to get your attention. Again this may happen gradually so increase the length of time before you open your hand as a clue.

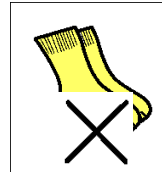
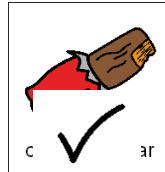
PECS stage 2: Increasing Independence



- ★ Increase the distance between the adult and the student.
- ★ As the child tries to give you a symbol picture to request, move backwards slightly so that the child has to stand up to hand the symbol over.
- ★ The child may need some physical prompting to stand up and keep trying to give the symbol.
- ★ The adult should then accept the symbol and give the child what they have requested as before.
- ★ Begin slowly, increasing the distance between the picture and the child so that she/he must go to the picture and then to the adult to complete the exchange.
- ★ Physical prompting by a second adult is often needed initially to remind the child of what to do.
- ★ Gradually increase the distance between the adult and child. The communication board with the symbol should stay right next to the child at this stage.

PECS stage 3: Discrimination

- ★ Discriminating between a picture of something they want and something they don't want:



- ★ Things now start to get a bit more complicated. Children quite often either get discrimination straight away or get really stuck and needs lots of help/practise.
- ★ Stick 2 pictures on the front of the board; a motivating one and one the child is not interested in e.g. paperclip or a sock.
- ★ If the child understands the difference between the pictures then carry on as you were doing with the exchange before.
- ★ However, if the child gets stuck at this stage and picks up the wrong picture, you will need to ask for advice from the professional working with you. This is essential to make sure that the child is taught in a structured way.

Choosing Between Two Things They Like:

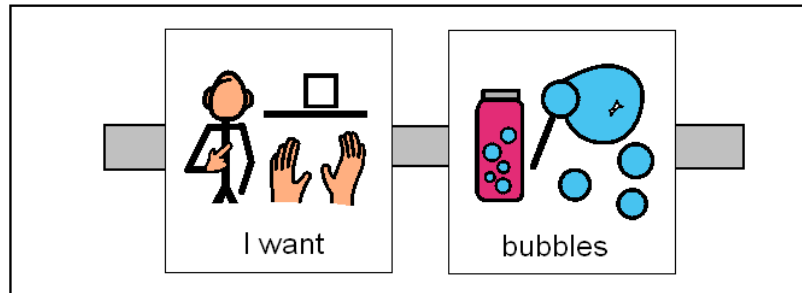
- ★ You now need to use two pictures of motivating things. This means you will need to be able to check that the child really wants the particular item that she/he hands over the picture for.
- ★ Present both the items on a tray and wait for the child to hand you the picture of the one she/he wants. Then allow the child to take it. If she/he takes the wrong item, there is a possibly a problem and you will need to get advice.

Choosing Between Three or More Things They Like:

- ★ Now build up the number of items the child likes so that she/he learns to tell the difference between a large range of pictures.
- ★ At this stage you need to also teach the child to look inside the file to find the picture they want. This may require a second adult to prompt again just for the first few times.

PECS stage 4: Sentence Structure

Adding a sentence strip with “I want” already stuck to it:



- ★ Attach a sentence strip onto the file with an “I want” picture on the left-hand side of it.
- ★ When the child wants an item, guide him/her to put the symbol on the sentence strip next to the “I want” picture.
- ★ Help the child to pull the strip off the file and hand it to an adult.
- ★ You will again need two adults to do this step.
- ★ When the child gives you the sentence strip, hold it and say what it says on the strip (“I want bubbles”) whilst pointing to the symbols.
- ★ The child should learn quite quickly to approach an adult and hand over the whole strip instead of just a symbol.
- ★ Check she/he can travel across the room as before.

Taking the “I want” Picture from Inside the File:

- ★ First move the picture to the left corner of the file and teach the child to move the “I want” picture and the picture of what they want onto the sentence strip and hand it over.
- ★ Then teach him/her to open the file and take out the “I want” and the symbol picture.
- ★ In teaching situations you can always put the pictures back on the front of the file to make it easier.

The Child Asks for Something She/He Cannot See:

- ★ Start to make opportunities for the child to ask for things that aren’t in sight.
- ★ You can do this by putting a desired item away as soon as the child has requested it and had a turn with it. She/He will learn quickly to ask for it, even though it can’t be seen!

Extending PECS: other stages and activities

- ★ Responding to the question, “what do you want?”
- ★ Commenting in response to a question:
 - “What do you see?”
 - “What do you hear?”
 - “What is it?”
- ★ Commenting on things that are happening e.g. “I can see snow”, “It’s raining”, “I can see aeroplane”.
- ★ Additional language concepts:
 - Colour e.g. “I want red Smarties”
 - Size e.g. “I want big biscuit”
 - Verbs e.g. “I want to blow bubbles”

Using PECS at home

Don't anticipate the child's needs. Always look for opportunities to encourage the child to communicate his/her needs.

Sharing Books:

- ★ Choosing a favourite book. Photocopy main cover and reduce size to make a symbol.
- ★ Sit down together and keep stopping/shut the book to encourage the child to request.
- ★ Later the child may be able to choose which book they want to read from an option.

Snack Time:

- ★ Choice of drink.
- ★ Give drink in small sips so the child has to keep handing over the symbol for more.
- ★ Choice of snack.
- ★ Give snack in small pieces to encourage the child to keep asking for more.

Dinner Time:

- ★ Choice as above.
- ★ Have symbols for the different parts of the meal and encourage the child to ask for the next item.
- ★ Have a drink with no cup/straw.
- ★ Give spaghetti with no fork, pudding with no spoon.
- ★ Prompt them to use the help symbol rather than cry or hand an item to an adult. I.e. 'I want help'.

Play:

The PECS book or communication board should be set up at the correct stage to meet the child's needs e.g. with many symbols (for a child who can discriminate) or with one symbol near the child and the adult (for a child not able to travel). A child who is used to having all his/her needs met will need prompting at first to ask for what they want.

- ★ Block off the steps to the slide so the child has to ask 'I want slide'.
- ★ Hold onto the toy so the child has to ask for it.
- ★ Hide an essential part of a favourite activity.
- ★ Keep pieces of a puzzle/block etc. Have a relevant symbol or at a more advanced level use this to teach concepts such as 'I want circle' or 'I want red block'.

- ★ Do a dressing up activity with a box of clothes, hats and jewellery. Have a symbol for each, give one item at a time and don't help with fastenings until asked.
- ★ Play a board game e.g. Mr Potato head. Child needs to request for the pieces.

Interactive Games:

- ★ Use a symbol when the child wants more of something he enjoys e.g. more tickles, more bouncing, more swinging and so on.
- ★ Games of lotto can be set up where each child has a choice of two pictures/colours or shapes.
- ★ Games where children collect sets and have to ask the child who has the piece they want e.g. they collect blue balloons and when it is their turn they have to look and see which child has a blue balloon and ask for it

General Strategies:

- ★ Always look for opportunities where the child has to request 'more' e.g. hold the paint pot so the child has to ask for more paint.
- ★ If the child is discriminating colour, offer as many choices as possible. E.g. colour of paint, paper, pencil, and cup.
- ★ Wait until the child asks to have the computer switched on.
- ★ Give a choice of computer programmes.
- ★ Give a choice of activities.
- ★ Choose a song or video.
- ★ Give a 'no' or a 'finished' choice
- ★ Choice of equipment needed in learning task or activity