

Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)

What is PECS?

The Picture Exchange Communication System, also known as PECS, is a communication system that is designed to support children who have little or no communication. The aim is to teach children to use pictures to make requests and to tell us what they are thinking.

Why does my child need to use PECS to communicate?

Some parents may feel that their child can already go and get what he or she wants, so PECS isn't really necessary. This is fine until something goes wrong (e.g. juice bottle is empty/the video is not in its usual place/somebody new that doesn't understand them/etc). It's **then** that your child needs a means of communication in order to ask for what they need. **Plus** communication is for much more than getting things that you need! Think of all the reasons you might communicate: greetings and socialising, asking and answering questions, commenting on things around you, sharing your feelings, telling stories about what has happened and your hopes for what will happen

Will using PECS stop my child from talking?

There is evidence from several studies that suggest the use of PECS can support children in developing spoken language. In the later phases of PECS children are given the opportunity to use spoken language alongside their symbols. If a child does remain non-verbal they are still able to progress through the phases.

Where can PECS be used?

As your child progresses through the phases they will store their symbols in a little folder (the PECS book). This folder can be fitted with a strap that will enable your child to carry their book with them. This makes PECS a very transportable system and it can travel with your child most places. It can be used at home, in school, on the bus, at the local park etc. Your Speech and Language Therapist or Clinical Support Worker will work with you and your child's setting to ensure everyone working with your child has the correct skills to support them.

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What are the PECS phases?

PECS skills are taught in a specific order, these are known as phases;

Phase 1 – How to communicate

Children are taught to 'exchange' a picture to receive a highly motivating toy or object.

Phase 2 – Distance and Persistence

Children are taught to be more persistent with their exchanges and will need to work harder or travel further. This phase is important as it teaches children how to generalise their new skill and use it to communicate throughout the day.

Phase 3 – Picture discrimination

Children are taught how to select the right symbol from two or more symbols. By the end of this phase children will have multiple symbols to choose from that will be stored in a folder known as their 'PECS book'

Phase 4 – Sentence Structure

Children are taught to use a 'sentence strip'. They will also learn to use the sentence opener 'I want' to create very simple sentences.

Phase 5 – Answering Questions

Children are taught to use their PECS book to answer questions ('what do you want?') as well as make requests.

Phase 6 – Commenting

Children learn to comment on the world around them. They will learn to use new sentence openers such as 'I see..' and 'I hear...'

Attributes

Children will learn to use attributes such as colours, big and little. This is usually introduced alongside the later phases.

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Rewards within PECS

PECS as a system has in built rewards, especially in the early phases. There are 2 different types of rewards or reinforcements we use; the tangible reward (an object you can see, hold or touch) and social or verbal reinforcement (praise). Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders usually respond better to a tangible reward and these are key to the initial stages. In phase 1-5 we will use activities and objects that are very highly motivating to the child and therefore by exchanging the symbol they will get time with that activity or object as a reward. As the child progresses to phase 3 and beyond we will introduce verbal reinforcements. This is sometimes referred to as 'ohhh to the new'. The idea is we are praising them for learning a new skill and it is important this is reduced as they become more familiar with the skill. We want them to learn the art of communication as a valuable life skill and not as an activity to please adults.

If you have any further questions talk to your Speech and Language Therapist or Clinical Support Worker.

PECS teaches the skill of communications for life in all situations.