



The Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)

A brief description

Many young children with ASD may have a difficult time understanding not just “how” to communicate, but “why” it is necessary to communicate. Many young children with ASD do not use words, gestures, or eye contact to communicate their needs, and instead may pull their parents’ arms or hands to indicate what they want. Other children may be incredibly independent. Communicating is a very complex and very social act. Challenges and differences in communicating is considered one of the hallmarks of ASD.

Teaching children a functional way to communicate provides an essential skill that can greatly decrease frustration and stress. Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) systems are often used to develop functional communication in children with ASD. Sign language, picture boards, and the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) are all examples of augmentative and alternative communication systems used for children with ASD. Some children with ASD who do not use words have been successful in using sign language to communicate. Sign language, like verbal language, is a very abstract communication method and may be challenging for young children with ASD. Picture boards or visual choice boards are often used to enable children with ASD to indicate their desires. In this method, children point to pictures, line drawings, or photographs that are attached to a communication board to indicate their wants and needs.

The Picture Exchange Communication System (Bondy and Frost, 1994), or PECS, is a specialized augmentative system designed to teach children with autism and communication challenges to initiate and maintain communication within a social setting.

PECS is based on the principals of Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA), and uses several ABA strategies to directly teach children with ASD how to successfully communicate using pictures. Research has demonstrated that PECS can be an effective tool to facilitate communication in young children with ASD (Bondy & Frost, 1994; Schwartz, Garfinkle, and Bauer, 1998). PECS can be used in the home, school, or community setting. Parents, teachers, therapists, siblings, and peers can learn to use this system to help children with ASD communicate. Effective teaching and use of PECS does require assistance from by an individual trained in the PECS model. Pyramid Educational Consultants, Inc. (<http://www.pecs.com/>) provide workshops and trainings in the PECS model throughout the country.

PECS is designed to teach children how to get their needs met, while understanding the social context of all communication. PECS has six defined and sequential training phases:

- Phase 1: The Physical Exchange
- Phase 2: Increasing Spontaneity
- Phase 3: Discrimination Training
- Phase 4: Building Sentence Structure
- Phase 5: Answering “What do you want?”
- Phase 6: Communicating in Response to a

Question

The PECS framework is based on a physical exchange between the child and a communication partner. In Phase 1, the child is taught to give a picture of a desired item to a communication partner in exchange for the desired object. The “picture” can be loosely defined as an actual photograph, a line-drawing or icon, or a symbol. The size of the picture is also dependent on the child’s abilities including their fine-motor skills. It is essential that the child:

- Understands what the picture represents.
- Can pick up and hand the picture to another person.

PECS enables young children with ASD to understand that they must communicate directly with another person to get what they want. If used correctly, PECS *will not* impede the development of verbal language. Research indicates that once they begin to understand that communication involves a social exchange, many children can develop verbal language. Teaching children with ASD to use a functional communication system is an invaluable skill. For children with ASD who are not yet communicating their wants and needs clearly to others, parents and professionals should consider the Picture Exchange Communication System.

For more detailed information

Pyramid Educational Consultants, Inc:
<http://www.pecs.com/> (books and videos/dvds can also be purchased on this site)

The iCAN website module on PECS:
<http://www.autismnetwork.org/modules/comm/pecs/index.html>

Additional Resources

Bondy, A. S. & Frost, L. A. (1994). The picture exchange communication system, *Focus on Autistic Behavior*, 9(3), 1-19.

Frost, L. A. & Bondy, A.S. (1994). *The Picture exchange communication system: Training manual*. Cherry Hill, NJ: Pyramid Educational Consultants.

Quill, K. A. (2000). *Do-watch-listen-say: Social and communication intervention for children with autism*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes Publishing Co

Schwartz, I. S., Garfinkle, A. N., Bauer, J. (1998). The picture exchange communication system: Communicative outcomes for young children with disabilities. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 18(3), 144-159.