

# Functional Use of Picture Communication Symbols

Picture Communication Symbols (PCS) can be used to support or enhance an individual's other modes of communication. It takes planning, teaching and time however, to ensure that PCS are a useful communication tool. The following are some considerations for implementing and supporting the functional use of PCS for communication.

## Communication Goals

Along with other goals, it is important to establish goals for communication development. A plan to work on identified goals may include PCS and/or other forms of augmentative communication.

## Opportunities for Communication

It is useful to take an inventory of daily activities, and identify vocabulary needed to communicate within these activities. When doing this, it is important to consider the various functions of communication – greeting, commenting, asking and answering questions, protesting, making choices, etc.

## Vocabulary Selection

There are a number of factors to consider when selecting vocabulary, including:

- ◆ Individual's characteristics
- ◆ Individual's interests
- ◆ Opportunities for communication
- ◆ Vocabulary communicated effectively in other ways
- ◆ Type of layout(s)
- ◆ Constant symbols
- ◆ Word vs. whole messages
- ◆ Intended communication partner(s)

## Organization

### Layout of Vocabulary

- ◆ Tray Display
- ◆ Book
- ◆ Folder
- ◆ Board
- ◆ Wristband
- ◆ Placemat
- ◆ Objects in the room

### Physical Characteristics

- ◆ size of display
- ◆ size of symbols
- ◆ number of symbols
- ◆ spacing of items
- ◆ arrangement of vocabulary
- ◆ color coding of symbols
- ◆ layout of entire vocabulary

## Considerations When Implementing PCS

- ◆ The functional use of PCS will not happen quickly or automatically - time and context-based teaching are needed.
- ◆ The more opportunities and expectations there are for an individual to communicate, the more likely s/he is to develop communication skills.
- ◆ If the use of PCS is not progressing, consider the barriers that may be in place and work to eliminate these barriers. Common barriers include:
  - Lack of motivation to communicate
  - Few opportunities / expectations for communication
  - Too few or too many PCS
  - Vocabulary that is not meaningful to the individual
  - The individual does not know what the symbols represent
  - Organization of PCS that does not make sense to the person using the set up
  - Set-up that does not fit with the abilities and needs of the individual

## Areas to Consider When Teaching the Use of PCS:

- ◆ What the PCS represent
- ◆ Where the various PCS are located on a display
- ◆ When to use them (i.e., whenever other modes are not meeting needs)
- ◆ Strategies that may be useful
- ◆ How the use of PCS fits into language development (i.e. using PCS to initiate interactions, to take turns)

## Engineering the Environment to Provide Communication Opportunities:

- ◆ Morning Circle (PCS to represent weather, calendar, news)
- ◆ Activity Based Unit (i.e., PCS of animals, food groups)
- ◆ Monthly Themes
- ◆ Job Charts (attendance)
- ◆ Cooking Activities
- ◆ Drama
- ◆ Music
- ◆ Community Experiences