

Communicating with Signs, Symbols, and/or VOCA

Communicating with signs, symbols or voice output communication aid (VOCA) support involves a number of different components all of which overlap in some ways but are distinguished by subtle but important differences:

- **Communication Vocabulary** is the words, concepts and meanings we make available to our students - whatever form they are ultimately presented in. We need to be careful to ensure that vocabulary contains a mix of different *parts of speech* – verbs, adjectives, adverbs etc., and not just nouns (people and things). It will often also include social phrases, questions, requests, comments, interjections etc. – ie representing different functions of language. Vocabulary will consist of 'core' and 'fringe' items as outlined by Latham and others. It will include highly personalised items, names and preferred places, activities etc.
- **Core Vocabulary** is part of the above vocabulary. It will include developmentally appropriate language ('how the child would say it if he could say it'), high frequency ie the most commonly used words – both generally and in relation to particular environments, eg. names of rooms/activities, and personal items. It will not include long lists of highly specific words eg. every imaginable type of food. Core vocabulary can be seen as core to one particular child, or, in specialised settings, as core to whole establishments. So some children might end up having their own personal core vocabulary that is influenced and supplemented by their school's core vocabulary.
- **Fringe Vocabulary** is lower frequency but highly specific word meanings. Although perhaps less commonly used, such words are vital when they are needed, as they tend to be high information carrying words that cannot easily be 'said another way'. So a child's personal communication vocabulary would always need to include some of this fringe vocabulary, not just core.
- **Core Symbols** is about symbols, not so much about vocabulary selection. It's to do with standardising the symbol representation of vocabulary. Some schools / authorities believe that it helps students (and staff) if there is an agreed set of specific symbols that everyone uses, so that wherever they are in the school or local area, or in transition across different settings etc., students will see exactly the same symbol and not a PCS in one place, Rebus in another, colour here, B & W there, a picture or made-up symbol somewhere else. Even if the establishment is committed to one single symbol system there are still 'synonyms' within that one system and some people may choose one while others use another (eg. the various 'school' symbols in PCS). Equally, some staff may choose to use a different symbol if they don't like or find meaningful the 'symbol that is supposed to be for that meaning. Symbols in use across establishments can quickly become diverse and confusing. Trying to standardise them to an agreed set can be a time-consuming and complicated collaborative task, hence it only really makes sense to do it for core vocabulary. (In any case, symbols for highly specific fringe vocabulary is sometimes less ambiguous anyway) Some places will save each agreed set or core symbols as graphics one by one to a CD or server, so that all staff can access them easily in all situations and / or

develop a mass of materials for use across the establishment(s), using the standardised symbol set.

- **Communication Aid** is the physical form in which the symbol vocabulary is organised and 'packaged' for an individual student to use. Low tech aids could be symbol labels, cards with one symbol per card, PECS books, wall schedules, symbol communication books, ring binders, charts or whatever. Especially if trying to work at whole school level only instead of also in a child-centred way, there can be a tendency to stick at the single symbol card level whereas many students have the capability and the need to work up from there to have a larger vocabulary permanently available to them in their own personalised symbol communication book or chart.

High tech aids will include VOCAs with symbol overlays on paper, or symbol layouts on a dynamic screen system.

Many students will use more than one of the above.

- **Communication method** is the way the communication aid is used. PECS is one particular specialised method (involving exchange of symbols, and is underpinned by behaviourist principles); it is only useful for some children (ASD in particular) but is not appropriate / needed for all children. The most natural and common method is direct indication. Communication is a two-way street, so communication method is not a 'within-child' issue. How the adult / communication partner elicits communication from the student and how they respond to communication attempts by the student all form part of the 'method'. Consistency from all adults is important. Repetitive 'scripts' may be a way of consolidating appropriate use of communication vocabulary.
- **Access method** is the mean by which the student physically indicates / selects symbol vocabulary, eg. eye or finger pointing, colour coding systems, partner assisted scanning, touch, switch & scanning, etc. - whether on books, ETRAN frame, computer, or VOCA.
- **Symbol Materials** is a much more general category than 'vocabulary' and simply refers to resources – ie. displays, books, software applications, worksheets, exercises, games etc. that have been created using symbols, for use by students who are at that stage of communication, language and literacy development. These may be made for whole groups, whole establishments and also for individual students. They are likely to be focused on specific areas of the curriculum and / or specific activities or projects ie. they will often be *topic-based*, rather than child-centred.

Some schools seem to view all of these communication components as one single confused 'lump', which may be why development of individual children's communication systems can get 'stuck'. Hope this helps (if only to stimulate discussion / disagreement etc....!)