

## Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)

*PECS should be introduced to a child by a trained professional*

### What is PECS?

- Stands for Picture Exchange Communication System
- Developed by Andrew Bondy (Psychologist) & Lori Frost (Speech & Language Therapist), Delaware USA
- For children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder – now used with all ages
- Teaches children how to exchange a symbol for something they like & want
- Teaches how to initiate interaction
- Can be acquired quickly
- Uses symbols or pictures to exchange for objects or activities
- Teaches children to express their needs & be more independent
- Can help reduce behaviour problems – by enabling to express more specifically
- Can support development of speech & help make it purposeful

### Before you start – identify motivators

A motivator is a highly preferred item

- Put out lots of things you think the child might like & observe what they go for – you can also monitor what they like in sessions you see them in.
- Set up a box of preferred things for specific PECS sessions and make picture symbols / photos to go in the PECS book.
- It's useful to have 1-2 non-preferred things that are boring (eg paperclip, brick), to help check the child is discriminating between pictures.
- Keep motivators up to date by adding new preferred things, and taking away most of the ones that are less preferred

### Phase 1: Physical Exchange for motivators

Aim: When the child sees a highly preferred item (motivator), they will pick up a picture of that item, reach towards the trainer (adult) and release the picture into the trainer's hand, in order to exchange for the preferred item.

- a) Use one item and one picture or photo of the object: 2 staff if need be, one in front (trainer) & one behind (prompter).
  - When the child reaches for a motivator, prompter takes hand & guides to hand it over to trainer. **PROMPTER DOES NOT SPEAK AT ALL**
  - Trainer answers as if child has spoken "Oh, you want RAISINS."
  - Trainer hands over a small quantity / or lets them use the motivator for a short time
  - Say "my turn" to retrieve item for the next exchange

- b) Wait with open hand cue for the child to hand over the picture.
- c) Start to phase out open hand (gesture) prompt – wait with no prompting, except making the motivator obvious if need be.
  - Start to phase out prompter.
  - Needs 40-50 exchanges per day but short & may be done in separate sessions.
  - Picture can be put on Velcro board or front of PECS book

## **Phase 2: Distance and Persistence**

Aim: The child will go to a communication board or book, pulls the picture off, goes to the adult and releases the picture into the adult's hand.

- Still use one picture at a time
- Trainer gradually moves away from the child – child has to get up
- Communication book or board gradually moved further away from child & trainer
- Child has to persist to put photo in trainers hand
- Alternative trainers introduced – getting used to exchanging with different people
- Introduce other photos of motivators one at a time
- Can start to put single picture in different places inside a book with pages so has to search through
- Make sure no access to motivating items other than through exchange
- Eliminate spoken & gesture cues
- 30-40 exchanges per day + training session

## **Phase 3: Making Choices**

Aim: The child will request a desired item by going to a communication board or book, selecting a picture from several, going to a communication partner and giving the picture.

- Up to 12-20 pictures
- Introduce choice of 2 – one motivator one neutral (eg paperclip, brick)
- Can use a blank card (“nothing”) if not discriminating between pictures
- **Error correction:** If child gives a neutral picture either say “we don't have that” OR give what they asked for
- Gradually increase the choice of pictures, rearrange sometimes so have to recognise picture rather than the place in the book.
- Check understanding of pictures by putting motivators on a tray – when child exchanges, you let them select the one they asked for. If they select something other than the one they exchanged for, either guide their hand to the one requested or redirect to exchange for the motivator they reached for.
- 20 + exchanges per day as well as a training session.

## **Phase 4: “I want...”**

Aim: The child requests what they want using “I want” and the object picture on a sentence strip.

- Request items that may or may not be here, using I want + 30-50 pictures stored book or board. Organise pictures in categories.
- Place on sentence strip and exchange whole strip. Don't accept single symbol exchange (except you could have requests to leave the room on a door –eg outside/ toilet)

- Always read the strip back to the child – then answer. Start to pause after saying “I want...” to see if the child will say the word for the item requested.
- You can start to add descriptive symbols – number, colour, shape, size & verbs. Start by using single words (I want red) then start to extend sentences (I want red car). See *Phase IV Activity Suggestions*.
- 20 exchanges per day besides a teaching session

### **Phase 5: “what do you want?”**

Aim: The child will respond to a question “what do you want?” by exchanging a sentence strip.

- Object present + I want card + PECS book/ board
- Adult says “What do you want”, the child is prompted to “answer” by making sentence strip to exchange (or pointing)
- Encourage to use this for things that are not here – outside, or in another room.

### **Phase 6: Commenting**

Aim: The child will respond to a question with a comment and then start to comment spontaneously.

This is harder because the exchange is much less rewarding, it’s about communicating for sharing information. Some children may not master this.

- Introduce “I see” symbols for the sentence strip, when a neutral object is present, or a picture
- Gradually expand the range of pictures
- Gradually get the child to discriminate between “What do you want” & “What can you see?”
- Gradually fade “What can you see” – say “oh.....!” to prompt spontaneous comments
- Introduce “I hear” symbol
- Teach feelings: this hurts, “I feel” happy / sad

### **Beyond Phase 6: Extending use**

Ongoing aim is to extend vocabulary including describing words / verbs / place words & phrases eg big biscuit; red cup; in the garden...

Learn yes and no.

PECS might have been phased out by now if the child is talking to comment and request.

### **Tips for exchanging**

- **Straight exchange** – Don’t prompt, staff remember to read out what have asked for before handing over; give small amounts at a time if want to encourage requesting
- **What do you do if child requests something they can’t have?**  
Read out what requested – then answer as if had asked with words. If need be can remove choices if being v persistent, but better if learn to accept that sometimes things aren’t available
- **What if Child doesn’t hand sentence strip over?**

Wait as long as you can  
Prompt with a flat hand

Prompt verbally “what do you want?”

- **What if Child goes to item without requesting?**

Try to redirect – eg flat hand prompt; what do you want; where’s your book?

But don’t put yourself at more risk than you need to.

- **What if Child chooses the symbol for something you know they won’t really want?**

Give it them anyway – they may have changed preferences!

They also need to learn to what happens if ask for something don’t want. Use the 4 step error correction procedure.

- **Need to check what to do?** Youtube has some video clips or contact SLT or Autism Outreach.

## **Error Correction**

Child gives sentence strip & adult reads it out: “I want paperclip”

1. Adult gives paperclip – child drops it
2. Adult prompts new symbol exchange with flat hand or “what do you want?”
3. Child puts different symbols on sentence strip & adult reads out: “I want chocolate”
4. Adult gives chocolate & child happy!

## **Tips for using PECS at stage 4-5**

- **Keep PECS book in the same place. The child should fetch it if they want something.** Encourage the child to be responsible for putting the book away
- **Get the child to take their book with them** – lunchtime, different rooms in school.
- **Keep motivator box activities organised** – e.g. use ziplock bags to keep puzzle pieces together
- **Decide how you will monitor progress** – e.g. monitoring checklist
- **Create opportunities to use PECS** during class sessions, break or lunch
- **Encourage PECS exchanges with peers and different adults** – peers have the thing the child wants; get peers to use PECS to request from the child.