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KENTUCKY AUTISM  
TRAINING CENTER 

Teaching Communication to Individuals with Autism

Laura Ferguson, M.Ed., BCBA

## Participant Outcomes

- Overview of Communication strategies
- Ideas on ways to teach communication

“Qualitative impairment in **COMMUNICATION**, manifested by at **least one** of the following”:

- Delay in or total lack of spoken language.
- Impairment in ability to initiate or sustain conversation.
- Stereotyped use of language.
- Lack of make-believe play

# Communication and Autism

- Deficits in nonverbal communication is one of the earliest signs of the disorder
- Deficits in vocal communication often the first symptom noted by others

# Communication and Autism

- Importance of communication as a foundation for the development of social, play, academic behaviors, etc.
- Importance of appropriate communication to replace or prevent the development of inappropriate communicative behaviors such as tantrums, SIB, aggression

# Modes of communication

## Topography Based

- Involves producing a unique response form for each word
- Examples:
  - Vocalizations
  - Sign language

# Modes of communication

## Selection Based

- Involves scanning an array of pictures, words or symbols and selecting one via point/touch
- Examples:
  - PECS
  - Dynavox
  - Go Talker
  - Intellikeys

# Communication

It is important that the communication we teach  
is:

Motivating

Functional



# Motivation

- If the words, signs, or pictures we attempt to teach are not motivating to the child it will be difficult for them to acquire the word.

# Mand

- Type of verbal operant in which a speaker asks (or states, demands, inquires, etc.) what he needs or wants.
- Example: asking for a shoe when you want a shoe.
- Asking for a gummy bear when you want a gummy bear
- Asking someone to stop tickling you when you want them to stop tickling

# Mand Training

- Mands are the first verbal operant acquired by a human child.
- They usually occur in the form of crying when a child is hungry, tired, in pain, cold, wants toy, afraid, etc.
- Typically developing children quickly learn to replace crying

(Cooper and Heron, 2007)

# Mand Training

- Manding not only lets children control the delivery of reinforcers, but it begins to establish the speaker and listener roles that are essential for further verbal development.
- Manding is the only type of verbal behavior that benefits the speaker.
- Meaning the mand gets the speaker reinforcers.

(Cooper and Heron, 2007)

# Mand Training

- It is important that mand training occurs throughout the day for individuals on the autism spectrum.
- This will include contriving situations and providing opportunities for these mands to occur.

# Contriving Manding Opportunities

- For example, Mickey loves vacuums and everyday after school he rushes to the hall closet to look at the vacuum.
- To contrive a mand for the vacuum you place the vacuum in another location. When he arrives prompt the mand for vacuum.

# Contriving Manding Opportunities

- Sally always comes into the playroom to grab the ball out of the toy box. You place the ball on the top shelf where Sally cannot reach it.
- You have now contrived the opportunity for multiple mand responses.

Examples; help, ball, where is it, which shelf, etc.

# Pivotal Response Training

- Procedures made to help “increase motivation, and promote generalization” using naturalistic and loose training techniques



# Pivotal Response Training

- Reinforcement of approximations/ attempts
- Reinforcement has a specific relationship to the desired behavior natural reinforcement ("ball" gets ball, not praise. Child chooses object for instruction and that object is used. This is done to increase motivation)

# Pivotal Response Training

- Motivation Child Attention
- Child Choice Reinforce Attempts Direct Reinforcement Intersperse Maintenance Tasks Shared Control (Turn Taking)
- Responsivity Tasks Involve Simultaneous Multiple Cues

# Sign Language

Teaching sign language to children with autism can serve the purpose of functionally replacing other disruptive behaviors such as aggression

Teaching a child with autism to communicate using sign language may be an easier transition to vocal communication

# Advantages of Sign Language

- May help to develop motor imitation
- Stimulus & response often resemble each other, providing a built in prompt
- Topography based, like speech
- Single stimulus and single response relation, like speech
- Community of signers already exists
- Can be used to teach all operants

# Disadvantages of Sign Language

- Parents & teachers must learn the child's signs
- Parents & teachers need to use sign language when interacting with the child
- Parents & teachers must teach/shape each individual sign

# Begin Sign Training by teaching Mands

- Identify items and activities that are reinforcing for the learner
- Select reinforcers that instructors can easily control and that provide many opportunities to mand (request)
- Determine the manual sign for each of the reinforcers the child will learn to mand for

# Selecting Mand

- Do **NOT** teach the following until the learner can mand for many items:
  - Yes/no
  - More
  - Finished
  - Please
  - Potty
  - Help
  - Eat
  - Drink
  - Help
  - Carrier phrases (“I want .” “Give me .”)

# Why not teach these mands?

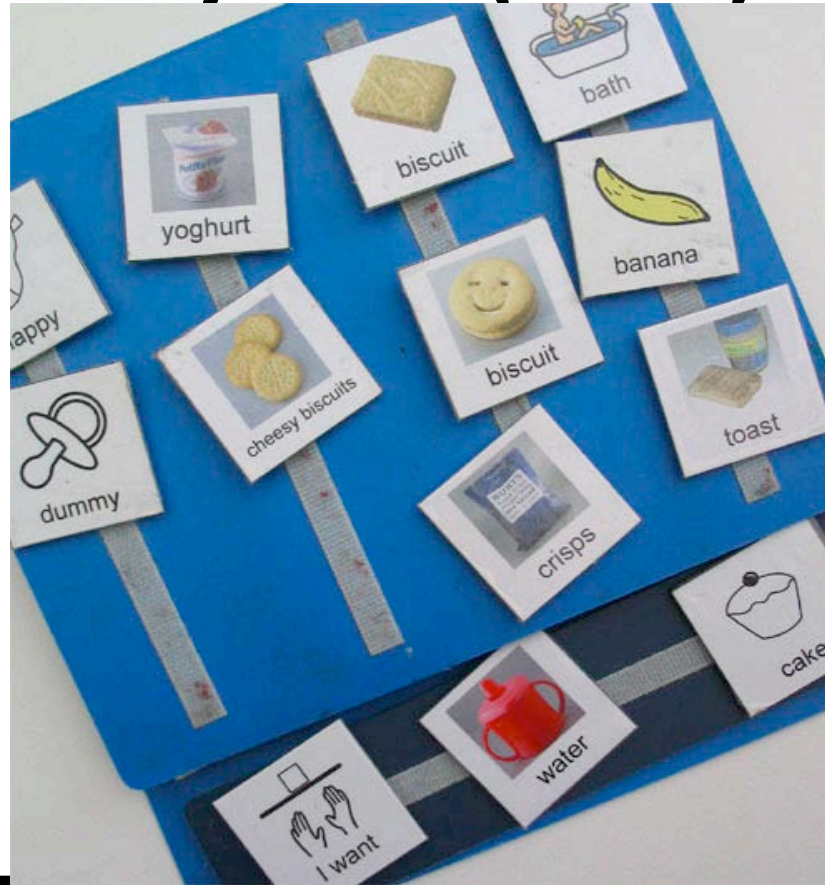
- These are generalized responses.
- If a child is signing “more” it will be difficult for the listener to understand and reinforce their request.



# Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)

- designed to teach functional communication with an initial focus on spontaneity
- There are 6 phases
  - How to communicate
  - Distance and persistence
  - Picture discrimination
  - Sentence structure
  - Answering questions
  - Commenting

# Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)



# Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)

- If PECS is chosen as the communication system it is important that the book is available throughout their day.
- Make sure it is available at home, school, on the bus, etc.
- This will increase use as well as initiation of communication

# Advantages of PECS

Each exchange is clearly intentional and readily understood. When a child hands you a picture or sentence strip, the request or comment is quickly determined

Communication is initiated by the child

Communication is meaningful and highly motivating

# Disadvantages of PECS

Parents and educators must be trained

After pictures and binders, it can get expensive

In order for a child to request something, there must be a picture. Therefore, there must be pictures of almost everything in their environment

## In Summary

One of the most important things we can teach individuals with autism is the ability to communicate.

- Choose a communication system( or let them choose)
- Be consistent
- Have the communication available all the time

Thank you so much for coming!!

**Questions??**

## Questions?

Contact info:

Laura Ferguson

[Laura.ferguson@louisville.edu](mailto:Laura.ferguson@louisville.edu)

## Center contact info:

Telephone: (502) 852-4631

Fax: (502) 852-7148 E-mail: [katc @ louisville.edu](mailto:katc@louisville.edu)

<https://louisville.edu/education/kyautismtraining>

