

Visual Communication Systems

Most individuals with autism have difficulty with communication. Children may have delays in all four elements of communication: receptive language (comprehension), expressive language, speech (articulation) and social communication, but a failure to talk is noticed by everyone. During the toddler years, parents and teachers may observe that a child seems to understand more than he or she expresses. When children understand words, but don't produce words, their educational team may begin to explore alternative ways to communicate. Tools that are used to replace words with visuals are called **Visual Communication Systems**. Children of all ages, teens and adults, may use these tools to communicate. These tools can be simple, such as pictures, or use more complex technology such as tablets or electronic speech devices. These systems help caregivers and a child's teachers and therapists understand what they want to say.

Visual Communication Systems vs. Visual Supports

Our environment is full of visual symbols that help us understand our world. For children with autism, who often have difficulty processing sensory information around them, visual supports can be very helpful.

Visual Communication Systems are different from visual supports, which help a child understand language. These might include picture schedules, first-then boards, and visual timers, pictures of expected behaviors and limits, and choices of sensory objects or activities or reinforcers. Visual supports meet your child's individual needs, promote support understanding, reduce anxiety or frustration by letting them know what they do next, and indicate when a task will be finished and when they can take a break.

While visual supports primarily help your child understand language, Visual Communication Systems help you and their teachers understand what they want to say. If they do not speak orally or their speech is difficult to understand, a visual communication system can be used as an alternative to speaking and will help others understand the child's oral speech.

Alternative Augmentative Communication

Alternative Augmentative Communication or AAC are alternative ways to help people who have language disorders. It's the term most commonly used to describe non-oral communication. AAC devices have visuals that can include real objects, miniature real objects, photos, realistic drawings, line drawings,

icons which may look like the real item but are somewhat "cartoonish" or icons that don't look like real items but they represent a word or symbol in an abstract way. The visuals in these systems might include one or more of the following:

- Real objects
- Miniature real objects
- Photos
- Realistic drawings
- Line drawings
- Icons which may look like the real item but are somewhat "cartoonish"
- Icons that don't look like real items but they represent a word (symbol) in an abstract way.

These visual symbols can be provided or presented in "no tech" ways: On a display (objects); on a plain or laminated page or sheet; as single items, often positioned on a board or on the front of a small binder; or Distributed on pages in a small binder.

They might be presented in "low tech" ways, with a recorded message paired with each picture or photo: On a page placed in a simple device with openings showing each item or choice; Attached to a large "button" that can be pressed; and they might be presented in "high tech" ways using an electronic device. These devices, including tablets, use software programs that include a set of icons and an electronic message. The programs also support a larger and more complex vocabulary and the ability to combine words into phrases and sentences. Most systems allow a child to use a growing vocabulary and combine words to communicate longer messages.

Teaching Your Child to Use a Visual Communication System

You might be relieved to see that there are visual ways to communicate when your child does not speak. However, you might also worry that using the visuals will limit the development of speech. Research has shown that the use of visual systems actually supports the development of oral communication. Children might use both to communicate their needs successfully.

There are simple ways to help your child begin to use visuals to communicate. If they understand spoken words and recognize that visuals stand in for words, photos of real objects or places or activities can be provided as alternatives for communicating. One of the most important things to remember, just like a spoken word, there always need to be a reason for a

child to use the visual “words”. The “power of communication” is letting others know what we want or what we need and what we don’t want. This is called communicating our “intent”. Any communication system needs to support communicating this intent.

Here are some things you can do to set up a first steps for setting up a beginning visual communication system at home:

1. Decide which things your child often wants or needs.
2. Take photos of those items or print pictures (non-copyrighted) from the computer. You can try different sizes, but 3x3 inches might be a good start. Place those photos on or near the place where the items are stored. For example, a photo of a juice box on the refrigerator door, train tracks on a toy box. Place those photos on or near the place where the items are stored (ex. juice box on the refrigerator, fruit chews on the drawer, train tracks on the toy box).
3. If your child usually stands by the location of the food, drink or toy when they want it, follow them to the location, let them know you think they might want the item (Oh, you want juice/fruit chew/track.) and model touching the photo as a request.
4. When your child touches the photo, immediately get the item and give it to them. You can repeat the words “want juice” and “here’s juice”. You can also ask your child to give you the photo instead of just touching the photo.
5. Encasing the photos with laminate helps keep them in one piece, but you can also cover them with layers of see-through tape if you don’t have laminate.
6. Working with no tech tools is a good first step before using a high tech device. Later, your child’s therapist can help guide you about having two choices in each setting or having a preferred choice and something they don’t usually want, so they learn to tell the difference between photos.

One of the most well recognized approaches to teaching communication through the use of visuals is the Picture Exchange Communication System® (PECS®). This approach was developed specifically for children with autism and intended to be used with preschoolers. It is a systematic behavioral approach that uses visual forms, though frequently icons from specific computer programs are selected by teachers and therapists who use this system.

Your speech/language pathologist or educator might recommend other approaches as well. No matter how you teach a child to use a visual system, and what you use to communicate, there are a few important things to consider.

The system needs to:

- Be easily accessible for the child, the family and the educators/therapists in a variety of settings
- Have clearly recognizable pictures/visuals
- Be portable
- Be durable
- Be easily updated
- Allow for increasing complexity (along without child’s increasing skills)

The Power of Having Multiple Ways to Communicate

Successful communication is best supported when a child uses multiple means of communicating. If you think about your own communication skills, you use nonverbal means such as body language, facial expression, and gestures, as well as visual and spoken words (sentences). A child using a visual communication system is also helped by using the nonverbal forms of communication.

Combining “words” and “word combinations” with eye gaze, body proximity, touch, gestures, facial expression, body language and even sign language helps their communication partner really “get the message”. Clear and successful communication results in meeting needs and wants, engaging in social interactions, sharing enjoyment and even solving problems.

Children, teens and adults who have limited to no oral speech, can become more successful communicators by using Visual Communication Systems. Work with your child’s therapist to choose appropriate visual communication systems.