

Picture Exchange Communication System

What Is PECS?

The Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) is based on Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) and is used to facilitate the development of functional communication skills in children who are not using speech to communicate.

The goal of PECS is to teach children how to initiate communication, so that they can communicate with others without any prompts. The development and use of speech is not a primary goal of PECS. However, research shows that using augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) systems, including PECS, will not impede speech development and may even improve it in children in some cases.

Where Do We Begin?

Before beginning PECS, it is important to know what the child likes. This is identified by noting which items a child consistently reaches for when given choices. When we know what the child wants, we can begin teaching him to request it using PECS.

PECS follows a series of phases to build new communication skills, including requesting and commenting. The method begins by teaching a child how to communicate by requesting desired items. It is important to identify specific items a child finds motivating and reinforcing. Toys and food items are commonly used. A child's most preferred items are used to teach requesting skills. A reinforcement assessment will be helpful in identifying a child's preferences.

The Phases Of PECS

Phase I: How to Communicate

During phase I, the goal is teaching the child that when he sees something he wants, he can pick up a picture of the item and exchange it for the item itself. Phase I focuses on waiting for the child to initiate communication. Typically, a child will reach for a desired item without asking or indicating want or need. But, using physical prompts, the child can learn to ask by exchanging a picture, instead of just reaching for it.



During phase I, it is necessary to have two trainers available. One person will be the child's communicative partner; this person gives the child the preferred item along with social praise when an exchange is completed. The other person acts as the physical prompter; this person silently guides the child through each step of the exchange. The most important thing to remember in this first phase is to wait for the child to initiate.

Phase II: Distance and Persistence

The goal of phase II is for the child to locate his communication book, select a picture of the item he wants, and bring the picture to a person in order to request it. Phase II teaches the child to communicate in more real-world situations. A child learns to find a picture and a communication partner when he has something to say. The communication partner slowly moves farther and farther away from the child to teach him to find the person he wants to talk to. Phase II also addresses gaining the attention of a communication partner. As in phase I, two trainers should be available for the same roles. The physical prompter silently guides the child to his book and communication partner. This phase is revisited each time a new skill is learned.

We are all born with great potential.
Shouldn't we all have the chance to achieve it?



Center for Autism and Related Disorders
at Kennedy Krieger Institute

Phase III: Picture Discrimination

The goal of phase III is to teach the child to select a desired item by choosing a corresponding picture from a variety of picture choices. In phases I and II, the child only has access to the correct picture. In phase III, the child learns to look at several pictures and select the one that represents the item he wants. Only one trainer is needed in this phase. There are two stages to picture discrimination. First, the child learns to choose from one preferred item and one nonpreferred item. Next, the child is taught to choose between two or more preferred items. After an exchange, the trainer offers all of the choices to the child and says, "Take it," meaning for the child to select the right item. This is called a correspondence check. Very specific error correction strategies ensure that the child exchanges the correct picture for each item. Once a child can discriminate independently, phase II is "re-taught."

Phase IV: Sentence Construction

The goal of phase IV is for the child to request desired items using the phrase "I want" and to construct a sentence using pictures that they can exchange for the desired item. Additionally, the child is taught to read the sentence to the communication partner by pointing to the pictures from left to right. Again, only one trainer is required in this phase. After the child learns to construct and exchange the sentence, phase II is re-taught. The child learns to find his book, create a sentence, and bring it to a communication partner when he wants something.

In phase IV, the child learns to comment on the environment using a variety of sentences. First, the child learns to answer the question "What do you see?" by constructing a sentence using "I see." Then other questions are asked to teach new comments. For example:

- "What do you hear?"; "I hear ____."
- "What do you smell?"; "I smell ____."
- "What is it?"; "It's a ____."
- "Is it a ____?"; "Yes" or "No"

After Phase IV: Attributes or Phase V?

After becoming independent at phase IV, PECS training can move in two different directions.

- **Attributes:** The child can learn to request more specific items by using attributes, such as colors, shapes, and sizes. It is important to note that the child must have a receptive mastery of the attribute before he is expected to use it expressively.
- **Phase V:** In phase V, the child is taught to respond to the question, "What do you want?" This is a very natural question that will lead to the next step in PECS: commenting. Remember, spontaneous initiation is still important. The child should still have the opportunity to independently make requests.

PECS can be used to "say" anything. Once a child learns to comment in response to questions and to do so spontaneously, he or she can learn to talk about many things. He can learn to introduce himself or tell someone his birthday—the possibilities are endless.

Want To Learn More About PECS?

Here are two recommended resources:

- *A Picture's Worth: PECS and Other Visual Communication Strategies in Autism* by Andy Bondy and Lori Frost
- Pyramid Educational Consultants Inc., www.pecs.com

Where Can I Learn To Use PECS?

Our center offers a four-week training program that focuses on teaching children and families how to use PECS. In our Picture Exchange Clinic, the family works with a speech-language pathologist to learn the basic principles of PECS and how it facilitates communication.

A core vocabulary is developed to fit each child's individual needs. Each session is customized to the child's and parent's training needs and allows the parent to ask questions, use newly acquired picture exchange skills, and to problem-solve with their clinician about ways to enhance their child's communication in the home, community, and school settings.

Contact Information: Center for Autism and Related Disorders

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