

PECS

What is PECS?

The Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) is an augmentative communication system developed to help individuals quickly acquire a functional means of communication (Bondy and Frost, 1994)¹. PECS is appropriate for individuals who do not use speech or who may speak with limited effectiveness: those who have articulation or motor planning difficulties, limited communicative partners, lack of initiative in communication, etc.

What are the advantages?

- 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. The child is given an effective avenue for swiftly and easily meeting his needs.
- From the start, *communication is initiated by the child*. Children are not drilled in rote responses to specific phrases or instructions; rather they are encouraged to independently seek out communication partners in naturally occurring settings.
- Communication is meaningful and highly motivating. Reinforcement for communication is natural and strongly rewarding.
- PECS may also help improve social interactions in children with autism. Because the child is in charge of approaching the communication partner, the child learns how to make the first move. For children with autism, approaching another person socially can be difficult. However, in this case, the child is not expected to speak, so the initial approach may be less intimidating.
- Materials are cheap, easy to prepare, and portable. A PECS symbol can be as simple as a hand-drawn picture, or a snapshot.
- With PECS, the child has an essentially unlimited pool of potential communicative partners. Anyone willing to accept a picture is available, not just those who understand sign language or who are familiar enough with the child to understand him despite his articulation or motor planning difficulties. Children are able to generalize communication to a wide circle of people very quickly.

Phase 1:

The first lesson we want to teach in the PECS program is to *spontaneously* request items or activities. To do this we first need to identify what exactly the individual wants, those things for which he would be willing to make a request. The outcome of Phase 1 is to initiate communication. By the end of Phase 1, the child will look at, reach, pick up, and release the picture into the communicative partner's hand. In other words, the process of initiating a communication exchange has begun.

¹ Bondy, A.S., and L. Frost. 1994. "The Picture Exchange Communication System." Focus on Autistic Behavior 9(3):1-19.

STEPS:

The child and two trainers are seated at a table. One of the trainers serves as a prompter who sits behind the child (or next to, if the individual is large) and is available to provide physical assistance to the child. The other trainer is the communicative partner, who sits in front of the child. One of the highly preferred items that has been identified through the reinforcer assessment is available, but out of reach of the child. The picture or symbol of that item is on the table between the child and the item.

The communicative partner **does not** give verbal prompts such as “What do you want?” or “Give me the picture.” As the child reaches for the preferred item, the prompter physically assists him in reaching, picking up the picture, reaching to the communicative partner, and putting the picture in their hand. The communicative partner has an open hand and grasps the picture, then responds as though the child had spoken a request by saying, “You want the _____,” and giving the child the requested item.

If the child does not reach for the item, the teacher presents the reinforcing items again to be sure that it is still a highly desired item. In addition, the communicative partner may use attentional cues such as showing the object or playing with the object in front of the child. Neither the prompter nor the communicative partner says anything until the picture is in the communicative partner’s hand.

Video example of Phase 1 PECS online:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZP481xnNdHM>

Fade physical assistance

Initially, total physical assistance is used to help the child learn a successful exchange. A method known as “backward chaining” is used to help the child initiate and complete an exchange with fewer prompts. As the child touches the hand of the communicative partner with the picture, the partner waits to verbally respond until the child releases the picture into his hand. As the child becomes more consistent with releasing the picture independently, prompts are faded in the reach stage, and in the pick-up picture stage. The communicative partner continues to show an open hand whenever the child reaches for the picture. Many opportunities for practice should include a variety of reinforcing items.

Helpful Tips

- Remember the first one is free rule to quickly assess the value of the item. Offer a bit or let him play with the item for a few seconds – if he does so, then assume the item is reinforcing.
- You must wait for initiation.
- The physical prompter does not interact with the child.
- The communicative partner and prompter should change places after a few trials so that the child learns that communication occurs with a variety of people.
- When an child releases the picture into the communicative partner's hand, the partner may choose to use the words that the child would say if verbal, "I want the _____" rather than "You want the ____." This is especially helpful with children who repeat phrases exactly as they hear them.
- After the child has become successful in the exchange, every few turns say "Take it" after the child has given the partner the picture, rather than always handing him the item. Document reinforcing items and activities regularly.
- Provide many opportunities for practice and keep it fun!

PHASE I
PECS

FP – full physical – hand over hand
PP – partial physical – light physical, push at elbow
I – independent – did not need any assistance

Date	Trial	Pick up	Reach	Release	Picture	Activity	Vocalizations
	1						
	2						
	3						
	4						
	5						
	6						
	7						
	8						
	9						
	10						
	11						
	12						
	13						
	14						
	15						
	16						
	17						
	18						
	19						
	20						