

Touch Cues

What are Touch Cues?

Touch cues (sometimes known as on-body signs) are physical prompts made on a person's body. Using touch can be necessary for some people who may need more than just a visual symbol to make sense of the world around them. Touch cues are a complimentary communication tool. They can be used alongside objects of reference, sign, picture symbols and more robust AAC systems, building up a multi-sensory method of communicating.

Touch cues can be used to build understanding and let someone know what is happening right now and what might happen next. Using touch in this way allows people to be part of what is happening around them instead of just having things 'happen to them'. For example, you might verbally say "We are finished eating, it's time for a bath" and use the touch cues "finished" "eating" "bath" when speaking that sentence. Touch cues support comprehension and understanding (receptive language). They are not an expressive communication system that the individual typically uses to tell others how they are feeling, or what they need or are thinking about.

Touch cues were originally developed for individuals who are deaf-blind or have multiple sensory impairments, e.g. for someone who has limited or no vision in addition to a physical disability or a hearing impairment. Touch cues are used to help individuals who are deaf-blind compensate for the auditory and visual cues they cannot access through vision, hearing or physically moving to another area in their environment. However, touch cues can be used to support individuals with a range of varying needs.

How do I know which Touch Cues to use?

A set of touch cues are usually developed by a team specifically for a person or group of people, making them meaningful and appropriate for the individual needs of the individual and team. Key words or phrases are selected and photos are taken of the cue so that this can be shared with everyone who works with this person. Consistency is key! This is why having a visual representation of the cue available to all is important. Display your set of touch cues on the wall and teach new people how to use them.

It is a good idea to communicate with the wider team working with the individual to collate important key words or phrases. This could be done alongside a gesture dictionary and become a working document. Once you are happy with the set, take photos (preferably protecting anonymity and keeping images quite generic for use with a wider client group). Display your set of touch cues and share with others working in the team.

Commonly used cues are those related to movement or change for the person. Some examples of useful touch cues:

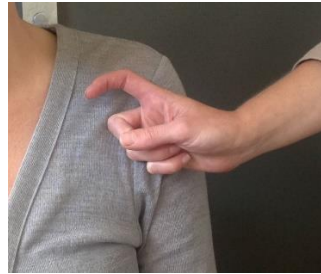
- two taps on the shoulder to indicate "sit down" or "I'm helping you to sit down"
- a closed fist in the palm of the hand could indicate "It's time to drink"
- 3 gentle taps on the collarbone area to make increase awareness that someone is going to unfasten the chest strap in preparation for transferring out of a seating system
- A gentle underarm upward pressure to signal being picked up, or a tap on the back of the hand to indicate that something tangible is being offered for the individual to hold or explore, rather than just putting it in their hand without warning



Sit down/Down



Drink



Ready/Straps off



Finished

Things to consider:

- Always accompany the touch cue with a spoken word or phrase.
- Always display a visual dictionary of the touch cues to ensure consistency.
- Is the touch cue clear and easy to define?
- Is this person comfortable being touched?
- How invasive is the touch cue? (you may want to avoid the face or head and consider what is appropriate culturally)
- Do you need to alert the individual that you are about to use a touch cue, e.g. you might warn them that you are going to use a touch cue by gently touching their right shoulder and then using the touch cue.

Benefits of Touch Cues

Touch cues can be used with people with complex communication needs to broaden their access to language and allow them to be active participants in their day. Touch cues are relatively easy to produce as a resource and can be adapted to compliment other communication strategies you are using. Touch cues can make adults language slower, simpler and clearer which gives the individual the processing time to understand what is being communicated. The touch cue can also be combined with finger spelling

Note: Touch cues are different to the Touch-Cue Method of articulation (speech) therapy, whereby a therapist applies pressure or otherwise touches an individual's face, neck, and head to provide a tactile cue for correct production of a speech sound.

References and additional sources of information:

Carole Zangari, 2019 (<https://practicalaac.org/practical/beginning-communicators-learning-through-touch-cues/>)

Gloucestershire Total Communication <https://www.totalcommunication.org.uk/social-symbols/>

<https://sensorysupportservice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Body-Signing-Special-School-Inset-Compatibility-Mode.pdf>

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