## Symbols in AAC Systems

### Symbols

There are a number of different published symbol set options available for use on both high tech communication devices and for creating low-tech resources These include PCS/Boardmaker symbols (Mayer Johnson), Minspeak icons (Semantic Compaction System), Symbolstix (N2Y Inc.) and others (please see this link for a more detailed summary of symbols options).
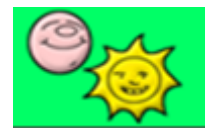
The use of symbols is common practice for many AAC users who are still developing their literacy skills, and for those who do not have functional literacy skills. The use of symbols helps ensure that a person can communicate, even though they may not yet be able to read and/or write. However, use of symbols in AAC is not restricted to people with limited or no literacy. People who have good literacy sometimes use symbols as a way to code and quickly retrieve stored information, thus speeding up the communication process.

Many AAC users are exposed to symbols in the form of photos and then progress to line drawings, however research and clinical experience tells us that there is **no hierarchy that must be followed** when introducing symbols (Romski & Sevic, 2005; Da Fonte & Taber-Doughty, 2010; Porter & Burkhart, 2010).

One of the most important things when introducing AAC to an emergent communicator, is to focus on use of **core vocabulary** and lots of **modelling/aided language stimulation.** We know that core vocabulary is difficult to represent in picture format e.g. how do you represent 'go', 'finished', 'more', 'again' etc.

### Learning what symbols mean

Strategies to use when introducing symbols to an emergent communicator:
- Keep the symbols consistent – do not represent the same word with more than one symbol.
- Keep the placement of symbols consistent – avoid moving symbols in a user's communication system, as this will interfere with their development of a motor pattern for where the words are located.
- Teach the meaning behind symbols in naturally occurring, motivating contexts through tonnes of modelling and responding appropriately to their selections of the symbols e.g. when they select **go,** push them on the swing whilst saying "**go**" / push them in their buggy or wheelchair whilst saying "**go**" / ask them where they want to **go** etc.

- Provide consistent auditory feedback – on a low tech board make sure that communication partners say the word the user is pointing to; on a high tech system ensure the voice output is able to be heard by the user.
- Consider the use of a colour coding system to assist users in locating words on their AAC system.

## Research and advice regarding symbol consistency

The type of symbol set to use in an emergent communicator's AAC system should be considered by using an individualised assessment procedure (such as the SETT framework) to guide decision making as to the most suitable AAC system (Zabala, 2005). Each AAC user is an individual, and as such their individual needs should be taken into account. Some factors to consider include:

- Vision status
- Hearing status
- Preferences of the AAC user and their family/key support people
- Environmental factors such as glare & lighting
- Age appropriateness
- Cognitive functioning
- Language exposure and access to aided language input

(McClure & Rush, 2007).

There is no available evidence to indicate one symbol set is better than another; nor any evidence to indicate that once a symbol set is used with an AAC user, that they must continue with that same symbol set for their entire life. Some more experienced symbol communicators are adaptable to different symbolic representations of a word as their knowledge and experience of that concept develops.  As with most considerations in the field of AAC, each person's needs should be considered individually. For example, a person with Cortical Vision Impairment (CVI) will likely have different needs when it comes to symbol selection than a person who has no visual impairment (for a more detailed discussion of this, please see this video). The only practice that should be cautioned is that of using a certain symbol set simply because that is the one the clinician or educator has access to or is familiar with (Schlosser & Ravhavendra, 2004).

For some users, particularly those early emergent communicators and/or those users with significant cognitive impairment, it will be important to maintain consistency of symbol use across low & high tech systems. However for others, they may easily be able to transition from one symbol set to another when moving from a low to high tech system, or when moving to a new AAC system, especially if they have some literacy skills. Ultimately, our goal should be the development of literacy skills, as this will reduce the reliance on symbols.

If you would like to discuss symbols selection further, please speak to your local TalkLink clinician.

References:
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