

Masking a low tech AAC system

What is masking?

Masking is the process of hiding specific words or symbols on an AAC system – it's a fancy way of saying 'covering up some of the words for a short while'. Masking should only ever be a temporary measure to support language development. Masking an AAC system makes it easier to focus on a few words, while still practicing the motor pattern of the whole communication system.

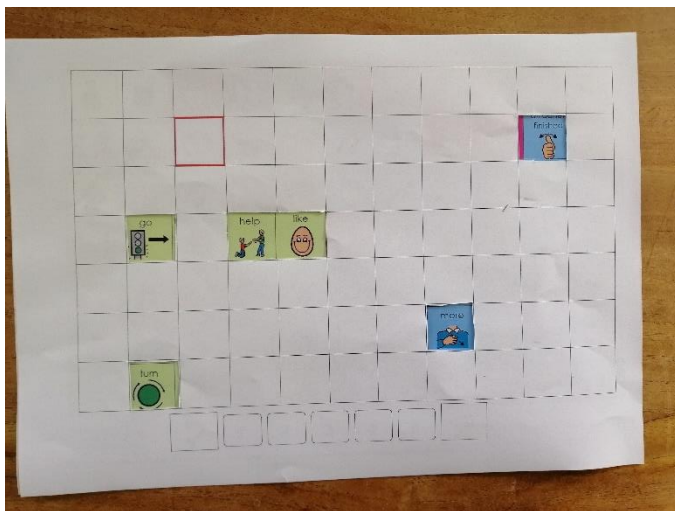
How do I make and use masking?

1) There are a few ways to **construct a mask**:

Use communication software (such as BoardMaker) to delete the symbol and word on a board and then print it out but you will need to print and laminate a new board each time you 'add' more words.

			what ?	again ↶↷		that ↗	this ↓	
		no-don't ⊘		do-did 👉		all done 👏	all gone 👏	
	drink 👉	eat 👉		go 📞			different 🟡🔴	
	help 👉	like 😊	look-see 👁️					more 👉
	stop 🛑		want 👉					

Print a blank overlay, cut out the squares for the words you want to reveal and then stick the overlay on top of the communication board using tape or bluetac – make sure you can take it off each time you want to cut more squares out to reveal more words.



- 2) Make sure you have a **plan to reveal new words**, e.g. add note in your diary each Friday afternoon to reveal 3 more words for the coming week. Or you can use the TalkLink core board weekly goals pack (see photos below). Email support@talklink.org.nz to request a copy of the weekly goals pack.

Communication Focus of the Week

This week we are practising...



Wearing our core boards.
Taking our CORE board with us everywhere we go!



CORE Board with Fringe Vocabulary Weekly Focus Building Blocks

Week Focus	Language Function	Examples of language samples you will focus on modelling this week
Week 1	Good Habits	Practice having your CORE BOARD with you all the time
Week 2	Single Words Verbs (green)	come /go/ drink/ eat/ get/ listen/ look /help /like/ open /put/ tell/ sit/ stand /stop/ turn /want/ wait/feel/make/play
Week 3	Single Words Adjectives (blue)	finished/ all gone/ good/ bad /big/ little/ different/ same/ happy /sad/ hot/ cold more /silly/clean/same/sick/
Week 4	Single Words Time related (pale blue)	again /now /it's time later/ ready
Week 5	Single Words Prepositions (purple)	in /out/ up/ down/ on /off/away
Week 6	Negation	Use all the words you have already learnt in conjunction with NOT/DONT to expand opportunities e.g. not go/ don't want/not finished etc.

Why use masking?

We should choose a communication board size (i.e. number of symbols on the board) based on what the **individual who is learning to use AAC can see (vision) and access (fine motor skills)**. We should not choose the communication board size based on cognitive skills, receptive language or what we think the individual who uses AAC can achieve. We often underestimate the individual's potential. This can result in starting with a communication system with too few words.

When we start with only a few words on a communication board, you'll soon need to add more. However if you move words around the board to accommodate the new words, individuals who are learning the AAC system have to unlearn what we just taught them, e.g. a words which used to be on the bottom left may be dead centre or the new verbs (doing words) that we added are in with the prepositions (location words) because there wasn't any more room in the verb area. You will eventually find the word but it's not an efficient approach to learning. Having a consistent location helps to develop a motor pattern which in turn reduces the cognitive and physical effort needed to find a word. Predictability is important for establishing motor planning for communication. Imagine if the keys on your QWERTY keyboard moved around every few weeks? It would be really, really hard to type.

So how do we avoid having to re-learn motor patterns? Start with the end in mind! **Choose a communication board based on what the individual who is learning to use AAC can see and access.**

Masking allows us to introduce new vocabulary on a communication board and helps an individual who uses AAC to look at (or attend to) the symbol they need in that interaction. This can increase success and maintain motivation, as it does not feel as overwhelming to search for and use the words. The overall objective is to build upon established motor patterns. Some reasons why you would use masking include:

- Helps reduce feelings of being overwhelmed for the whole team
- Helps develop the motor pattern for that word
- Reduces the distraction of extra words on the communication board
- Requires less cognitive effort to use the system when you know the motor pattern
- Makes it easier to teach new word because you just unmask a new one (rather than creating a whole new communication board with the new words)

Masking means that the team can start with the simpler version (the one with the fewest words/symbols) and add the next set of words/symbols into their rightful places a little at a time. This accommodates the individuals need to start with a relatively simple communication board and also maximizes learning efficiency by expanding the communication board in a way that makes sense over time.

Things to be mindful of when masking

Although we have the ability to mask words on a communication board we must be mindful of the consequences of doing so. As we mask words we may inadvertently:

- Over-mask and thus remove words the individual knows, or could use, to express themselves
- Be tempted to presume a certain level of competence/potential that is perhaps lower than reality
- Forget to unmask or not know how fast to unmask additional words as language learning progresses

Our ultimate goal is for the individual who uses AAC is to have access to all the words on their communication system quickly and efficiently, so make sure you have a plan to unmask new vocabulary ever week or fortnight. The goal is to keep moving forward as the individual gains skills.

Wherever possible, try to use the whole communication board without masking it (see ideas in next section).

How to highlight specific vocabulary without masking

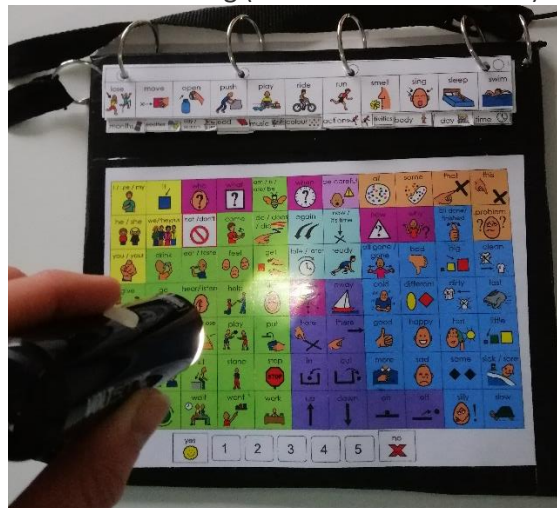
Circle weekly focus words with a whiteboard marker (shown in red in the photo below)



Use a brightly coloured “focus finder” (pink square in the photo below) to draw attention to the word while modelling



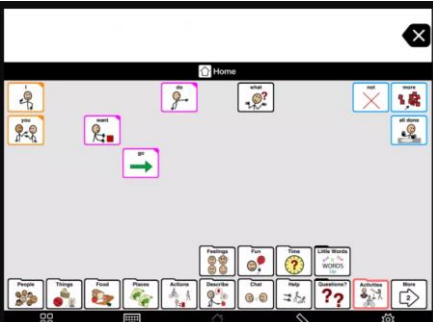
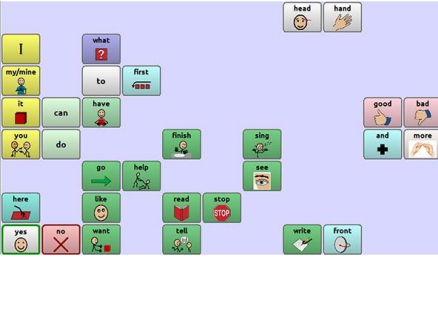
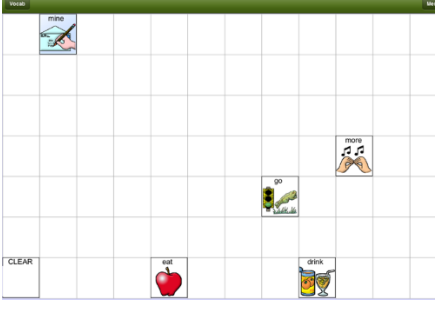
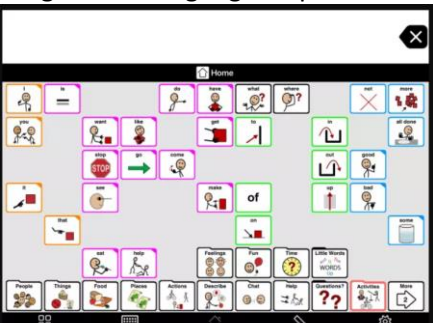
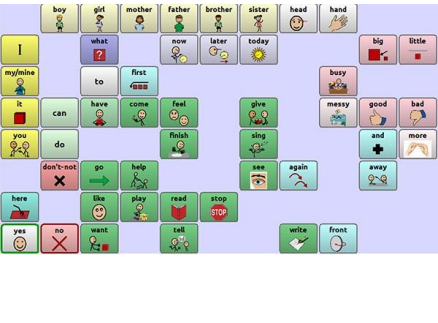




Point to symbols with a torch or low powered laser pointer while modelling (best on matte laminate)



Masking on high tech communication systems

Most robust high tech communicating systems have a way to mask vocabulary. Proloquo2go has a systematic way to mask vocabulary and then introduce it slowly over time – this is called Progressive Language and it is built into the communication app. Using Progressive Language, you can quickly hide many buttons without changing the grid size. By moving up through the Progressive Language steps, you can gradually reveal new buttons in a developmental order. As you reveal new buttons, the buttons the individual has already learned do not move around.

This can also be done manually though 'hiding' words on TouchChat, LAMP, Unity and other communication apps. Here are some examples:

Example of Progressive Language on Proloquo2go	Example of hiding buttons on TouchChat WordPower	Example of using Vocabulary Builder in LAMP Words for Life
<p>Progressive Language step 1</p> 		
<p>Progressive Language step 4</p> 		
<p>Progressive Language step 6 (all buttons)</p> 		

References:

- <https://practicalaac.org/practical/make-it-monday-manual-communication-boards-with-core-vocabulary/>
- <https://liberator.net.au/support/education/aac/masking>
- <https://practicalaac.org/strategy/more-on-teaching-core-vocabulary/>
- <https://www.assistiveware.com/support/proloquo2go/vocabulary-grammar/introduce-core-words>

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