Tip of the week: Colour coding language

For a lot of our clients language is complicated and abstract. Speech and Language therapists across the world have been using colours and pictures to help clients make sense of language for decades. Colours are always the same (yellow is always yellow, red is always red) and if you use them consistently in your communication system it can really help you or your client and their family understand and use language within an AAC system. Colour coding is used in low-tech, mid-tech and high-tech systems. It can also be used to support language development in clients who are using some spoken language.

At TalkLink we regularly use colours to help our clients understand and organise the language in their communication systems. Here are three examples of colour coding systems that are used in Speech and Language Therapy.

One of the low-tech systems used is the Pixon Kit (Van-Tatenhove see below), which uses the Fitzgerald Key (Edith Fitzgerald 1929) for coding language. What this colour coding system does is group words together by how they are used e.g. the pronouns or subjects have a yellow background, the verbs or action words have a green background, question words are pink and so on.

Goosens', Crain, and Elder (1992) also developed a colour coding system which uses the following colours:

VERBS words which tells action OPEN, COME (Pink)

DESCRIPTORS adjectives and adverbs PRETTY, SLOW (Blue)
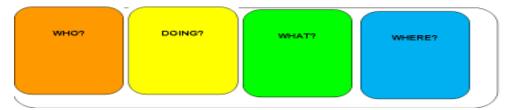
PREPOSITIONS position words IN, OFF (Green)

NOUNS person, place or thing CAR, STRING, MARY (Yellow)

MISCELLANEOUS (Orange)

Another way of colour coding language is using Colourful Semantics by Alison Bryan (1997). This system also groups words together by their function e.g. orange is the 'who?' in the sentence, yellow is the 'what is it/she/he/they doing?', green is the 'what is it?' etc.

| WHO? | DOING? | WHAT? | WHERE? |

Colourful Semantics is generally used for clients who have some spoken language but who might find it tricky to put words in the right order or understand narrative questions.

The best part about using colour coding is you do not have to tell your client 'this word is a yellow word' you just need to use it! Modelling or Aided Language Stimulation will show your client how the words are grouped. Our clients learn through exposure and experience so when we show someone time and time again they will learn from us. The best way to model communication is to point to the words as you are saying them to your client.

Colour coding is a great way to turn something abstract into something more concrete. You can add the colour to the background, as the border or a title bar whichever works best for you or your client.

As with all things AAC there is no "one size fits all". We encourage teams to use a coding system that works for them but that is consistent. In order for any coding system to work for a client it must be consistently used across a range of places or environments with a range of people. If your school/hospital/residential facility uses the colour blue to indicate a direction is being given then you could change your AAC system so that instead of blue you might use grey. Consistency is the key.

For more examples of colour coded communication systems go to the 'resources' tab on the TalkLink Website : www.talklink.org.nz