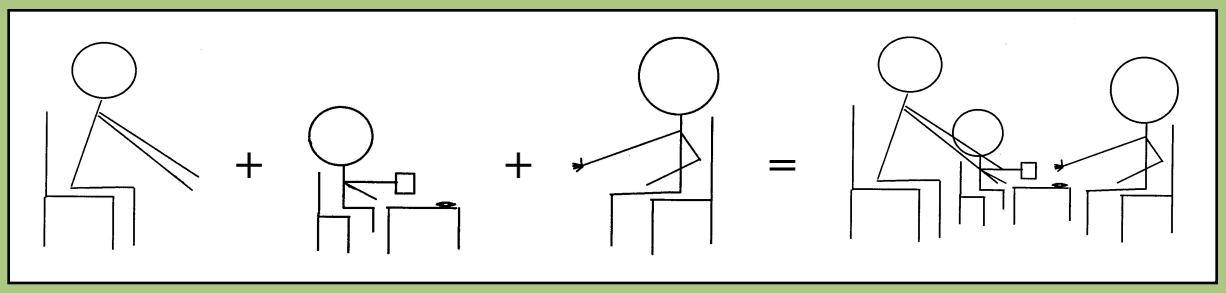
The Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)



The information in this document was taken from An Introduction to PECS video and the PECS Training Manual, both by Lori Frost and Andrew Bondy.

What is PECS?

PECS (The Picture Exchange Communication System) is a communication method for children with autism or other communication disorders that teaches the children to approach an adult and give her a picture of a desired item in exchange for that item. By doing this, the child initiates a communicative act for a concrete outcome within a social context. That last sentence is very important. Let's break it down to get a better understanding of it:

The **child initiates**...

Through PECS the child learns to be spontaneous and act without prompting from an adult. This ability gives the child more control over his own self-expressions.

...a **communicative act**...

A communicative act is a way of expressing one's needs and wants. We all need to have ways to express ourselves and be understood. Children who do not have an avenue of functional communication may exhibit difficult behaviors out of frustration.

...for a **concrete outcome**...

From the picture-exchange act, the child receives an outcome such as food, drink, or a toy that he wants. Receiving a tangible, desired item teaches the child to value the act of communicating with others.

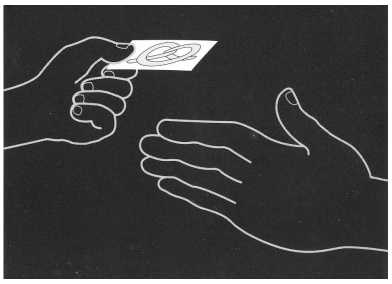
...within a **social context.**

PECS can be used in a variety of environments such as home, school, or the community. Unlike sign language which is understood only by a select few, picture cards can be interpreted by almost anyone. This increases the child's opportunities for social participation in her community and interactions with family, friends, and neighbors.

What do children learn in PECS?

The purpose of PECS is not speech acquisition, but rather the development of functional communication. In PECS, children learn to **request** and to **comment**. Requesting is asking for a tangible thing that the child wants. This is taught first because the desire for a particular item serves as a motivation to learn the picture-exchange process.

Commenting is labeling, sharing, or exclaiming something to another person, such as "I see a bird." This results in an interactive response from the other person such as praise, smiles, or hugs. Because commenting is learned in the advanced phases of PECS, it will not be discussed in depth here. From both commenting and requesting, the child learns to initiate communicative exchanges.



Why is PECS important?

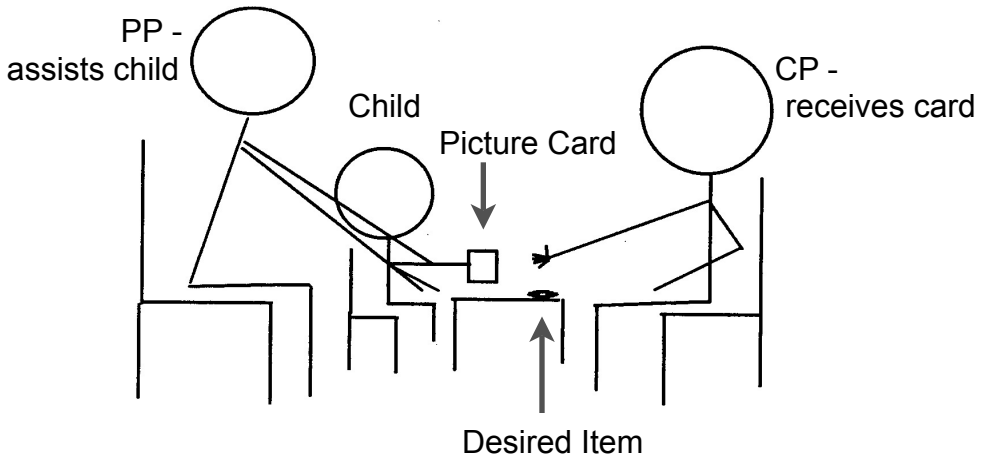
Imagine the frustration of not being able to express to others your need or desire for certain things. If you did not have a universally understood method of expression, someone might interpret your attempts to communicate as bad behavior or defiance. Children must have a way to express their needs to adults who can meet these needs. PECS gives children with communication difficulties a functional way to express themselves.

PECS is also valuable because it teaches children to **initiate**. When a child can spontaneously initiate communication with others, she gains independence in self-expression. This independence may serve as a foundation for spontaneity and growth in other areas as well.

How does PECS work?

In order for the child to value the communication exchange, the adult must use items that are highly preferred by the child. If you do not know the favorite foods, drinks, and toys of the child you are working with, ask the parents or observe which things the child reaches for on his own.

Phase I of PECS training requires 2 adult trainers, one to be the Communicative Partner (CP) and one to be the Physical Prompter (PP). The process also requires a desired item to be available, as well as a picture card that corresponds with that particular item.



The Picture-Exchange Process

1. The CP sits across from child and gets his attention by making the desired item visible to the child. The picture of the item should be placed in front of the child and within easy reach. The CP then waits with an outstretched hand to receive the picture card. The CP does not talk. Resist the temptation to use verbal prompts ("Pick up the card") or questions ("Do you want a cookie?") because then the child is responding to prompts instead of learning to initiate.

2. As the child starts to reach for the desired item, the PP guides the child's hand to pick up the picture card, reach toward the CP's outstretched hand, and release the picture into her hand. The child will likely need physical assistance to learn the process of handing over the picture and may also need help grasping and releasing the card if he has fine motor difficulties.

3. The CP then responds as if the child has asked for the item. The CP turns the picture around so the child can see it, says "I see you want ____" (filling in the name of the desired item), and gives the item to the child with enthusiasm.

4. The child is then allowed to enjoy the item, which means eating or drinking a food item or playing with a toy depending on what type of item was used.

5. The process is then repeated.

Suggestions to maximize your teaching:

-If the child tends to quickly take the presented item without exchanging a picture for it, the CP can hold the item in her other hand (the hand not receiving the card) so that the child cannot unexpectedly grab the item.
-The trainers should alternate being the CP and the PP so that the child learns to give the picture cards to different people.
-The training should end before the child loses interest in the reinforcing item.

Fading assistance as the child learns:

Initially, the child participates in a "fully-assisted exchange," which means that he receives physical prompts from the PP and a visual cue from the CP's outstretched hand. Repeated practice with these two supports teaches the child the process of exchanging the picture for the item. Once this concept is mastered with the supports, the PP fades the physical assistance until the child picks up and hands over the card independently. Next the CP fades having his hand open and outstretched. At the end of Phase I, the child initiates picking up the card and offering it to the CP with no assistance.

We will only cover Phase I in depth here, but once the child shows mastery of the picture-exchange process, the teaching moves through these next levels:

Additional Phases	Description of that Phase
Phase II – Increasing spontaneity	The child learns to communicate with different people, in different settings, and for different items. Here the CP is less easily accessible, and the picture card may be placed further away from the child so that she has to retrieve it.
Phase III – Discrimination of pictures	The child learns that different pictures correspond to different items and learns to discriminate between pictures in order to select the item that he wants. For example, the child might choose between pictures of a ball, a car, and play-doh in order to communicate which toy he would like to play with.
Phase IV – Sentence structure	The child learns to pair two cards together to make a sentence of the form: "I want ____." To do this, the child pairs the card of a desired item with a card representing "I want." The pair of cards is then handed to the CP in exchange for the item instead of the single card.
Phase V – Responding to "What do you want?"	The child builds on his ability to construct an "I want ____" sentence by doing so in response to the question "What do you want?"
Phase VI – Commenting in response to a question	The child learns to make sentences in the form "I see ____" in response to questions such as "What do you see?" Here the child does not receive the visible item but instead learns how to participate in conversation through spontaneous commenting.

Questions for review:

1) Fill-in the blank:

The child _____ a _____ act for a concrete outcome within a _____ context.

2) What is the role of the physical prompter?

3) What is the role of the communicative partner? Does this person verbally prompt the child?

4) Do you think the PECS system is valuable? Why or why not?