Encouraging Speech & Language Development in Children with Autism

For children who are non-verbal the first step is to put a functional communication system in place for the child to teach him/her to communicate their wants and needs. There are more and more different types of augmentative and alternative communication systems out there nowadays. Below are some that I've used or seen in use before;

- PECS – Picture Exchange Communication System www.pecs-unitedkingdom.com
- Grace App – An application based on picture exchange, available on ios devices www.graceapp.com
- Lámh – Sign language for children www.lamh.org
- Proloquo2Go – another app based on picture exchange www.assistiveware.com
- Tobii Dynavox – www.tobiidynavox.com

Your choice of system will depend on your child's individual needs and abilities; i.e. their fine motor skills, hand/eye co-ordination, imitation skills, etc. I have most experience using PECS and Grace App so I will discuss both a little further below.

PECS – Picture Exchange Communication System

The Picture Exchange Communication System would usually be my first approach as I've seen huge successes with it.

I would recommend teachers and parents to complete a PECS course before beginning using and teaching the system to your child. You can find your nearest course at www.pecs-unitedkingdom.com or www.synergylifelonglearning.ie also run these courses. I have done the course myself and it is fantastic.
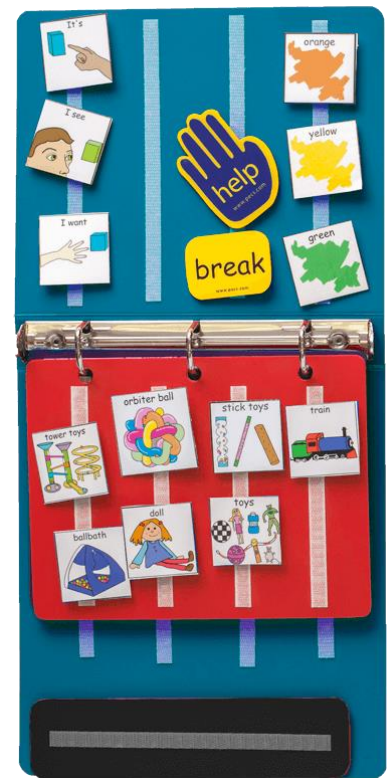
Children need to learn the value of communication before we can ever expect them to want to speak.

- When engaging in a PECS exchange with your child, it is important that you always say the spoken word as your child points to the picture. Let your child hear the word of the item they are requesting more than once during the exchange.
- The PECS book should be brought everywhere. It is now your child/student's voice and communication happens everywhere.
- You can expand your child's vocabulary by increasing the amount of pictures in his/her book and teaching him/her to form sentences such as; I want, I see, I hear, etc.

- If your child takes you by the hand, points to a cupboard, hands you something to open, etc. you should always prompt them to their PECS book so that they are communicating with words rather than gestures.
- Unlike some other systems and speech generating devices, PECS requires the user to approach the communicative partner, hand over the sentence strip and point to the pictures, therefore creating an interaction between child and partner.

Grace App

Grace app works off the same principle as PECS, it is very similar to PECS except it is an app for ios devices. It is available from the app store for approx. €30.

Grace App, like PECS requires the child to select the items he/she wants, turn the device to create a sentence strip, approach the communicative partner, exchange and point to the pictures of what he/she wants, again creating an interaction. I would usually move to Grace App once the child has completed up to Phase 4 of PECS.

You can also take and add real life photos to Grace App in seconds.
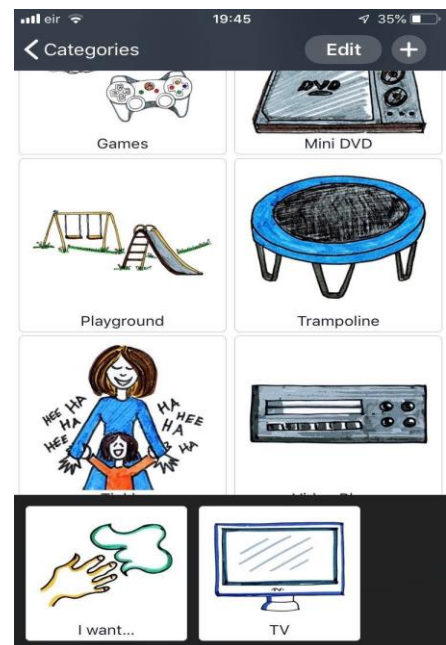
Communication via Verbal Language

Often children with ASD might have a lot of words and a large vocabulary, but sometimes don't know how to use their words functionally.

The first step is to create a Manding (requesting) program. Teach your child how to request things that he/she wants. Just like with PECS or Grace App (above), when your child uses gesture, or other behaviour to access a desired item, you are instead going to prompt functional communication.

For example;

Child: *takes you by the hand to the biscuit tin

Mum/Teacher: "Biscuit" (You say the word of what your child wants, prompting him/her to say it).

Child: *taps the tin and says nothing

Mum/Teacher: Again say "Biscuit"

Child: "Biscuit"

Mum/Teacher: "Biscuit, you can have biscuit" and hand over a biscuit,

It is important that you prompt the language every time your child requests something.

As your child progresses and is independently requesting items using clear one word utterances, you can then move on to building sentences, for example; "I want". You can download an image representing 'I want' from Google images. Laminate it and use it as a prompt to teach your child to put 'I want' before the item that he/she wants.

For example;

Child: "bubbles"

Parent: Hold up the 'I want' visual and say "I want bubbles"

Child: "I want bubbles"

It will take time for your child to learn to associate the visual with "I want", once your child knows that the visual means "I want" then he/she will understand what you want him to say when you show the visual. You can gradually fade out the visual prompt then until your child independently uses "I want". You can do the same to teach other phrases to your child.

Exposing your child to verbal language

Use narration to expose your child to language throughout the day. Expose your child to the words and phrases that describe what he/she is doing and what you are doing.

When you are doing things around the house, talk about what you are doing and why you are doing it, it doesn't matter if they're not always listening but by exposing them to the language all day every day their vocabulary will be increased. In the same way you do this, you can also narrate what your child is doing.

Example 1; 'Mammy's washing Evie's clothes....t-shirt, shorts, trousers' – as you're washing the clothes, label time.

Example 2; 'You're playing with playdoh, oh you have blue playdoh, are you making an ice cream, I think you're making an ice-cream...'

When you're driving in the car, talk about your day, what you did, what you're going to do, etc. For example; after school, talk to your child about what you'll do when home 'we're going to have dinner, Evie can watch some TV, Mammy is going to wash the dishes, then we'll have a bath and read a story….I wonder what story we'll read tonight'. It can be that simple.

Even if your child cannot speak, talk to them and ask them questions. Your child might respond with gestures, eye contact, or one of the AAC systems mentioned above. Your child might not respond but it is good to keep asking questions and expecting an answer. If your child does respond through gesture, eye contact, etc. it is good to put their gestures into words for them.

For example; If you ask "Did you have fun in school today?" and he/she nods yes. Then you say "Yes, you had fun in school today. That's great, I had a good day too…".

Song-Singing

Sing nursery rhymes or other age-appropriate songs with your child. Pause at different stages throughout the song and wait to encourage your child to fill in the blank word in the song.

For example;

'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little _____"

- Pause and wait for a response from your child, the response could be a words, sounds, eye contact, gesture, etc.

It is a nice way of encouraging interaction.

Oral Motor Skills

Any SLT that I've worked alongside, has always suggested working on oral motor activities to assist with speech development. Some of the oral motor activities that I've used are listed below;

- Blowing bubbles
- Mr. Tongue Story – this encourages children to perform different oral motor actions. It is available online at https://search3.openobjects.com/mediamanager/southampton/directory/files/mr_tongue_pdf.pdf
- Funny faces – using a mirror model and encourage your child to make different faces by moving their tongue, lips and muscles in their mouth.
- Drinking through a straw
- Blowing through a straw – use water play, add washing up liquid and show your child how to play bubbles through the straw.
- Blowing whistles, harmonica, etc.

I'm sure there are plenty of other ideas out there if you do a Google search, these are just some that I've used.

Intraverbal Skills

This refers to a response from the child to another person's words. For example answering a question, or filling in the blanks. To teach intraverbal skills, I would first start with song-singing (above).

Following this I would teach the child to fill in the blanks in common phrases. Choose maybe two phrases at a time and aim for a total of 20 phrases.

Some common phrases that I use;

- Mammy and _____
- Shoes and _____
- I love _____
- Wash your _____
- Close the _____
- Dog says _____
- Cat says _____
- Happy _____

Initially you will have to teach your child the correct response by prompting them to fill in the blanks. Any form of appropriate response to these phrases should be accepted, for example; I once had a child finish the phrase 'I love_____' with CAKE! 😊 He wasn't wrong!

Following this you can begin working on answering questions. I would always start with simple question that have a factual answer. Personal questions are usually good to start with. For example;

- What is your name?
- What age are you?
- Where do you live?
- Where do you go to school?

Again you will have to teach the response to your child by prompting him/her with the correct response.

Tacting

Tacting refers to labelling. Expand your child's vocabulary by teaching them to label different items. For this task you can either use pictures of items or the actual object. Create a box of items that you are going to work on. Start with 10 and build up, I would teach two items at a time, depending on your

child/student's ability they may only be able to learn one new item at a time or may be able for more than two.

Hold up the item and ask "what's this?" – initially you'll have to prompt the correct response. Once your child has mastered a new object, add in another one and keep going. Your child can never have enough words. I would begin this task with some of your child's favourite things, e.g. favourite foods or toys. Then build up to more common everyday objects, e.g. chair, table, etc.

This book has been designed and written by Jessie Kelly from @inspiredbyautism. All information used is from my own knowledge and experience. I am not a speech and language therapist, just a teacher working with children with ASD.