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Contacts

• Blissymbols – 100 & 400 symbol Blissboards. Available from Blissymbol Communication (UK), c/o The ACE Centre, 92 Windmill Road, Oxford OX3 7DR. Website: www.blissymbols.co.uk
• Dynavox – Dynavox Systems Ltd, Sunrise Medical Building, High Street, Wollaston, West Midlands D78 4PS. Tel: 01384 446789. Email: enquiries@dynavox.co.uk. Website: www.dynavox.co.uk.
• Makaton – The Makaton Charity, Westmead House, Farnborough, Hampshire. Tel: 01276 606760. Email: info@makaton.org Website: www.makaton.org
• Minsymbols – Liberator Ltd, Minerva Business Park, Lynchwood, Peterborough, Cambs. PS2 6FT. Tel: 0845 226 1144. Email: info@liberator.co.uk. Website: www.liberator.co.uk
• Widgit Literacy Symbols & PCS Symbols – Widgit Software, 26 Queen St, Cullington, Leamington Spa, Warwickshire CV32 7NA, UK. Tel: 01223 815210. Email: info@widgit.com Website: www.widgit.com

Useful Resources

• Literacy Through Symbols: Improving access for children and adults (2nd Ed) – by Tina Detheridge & Mike Detheridge (2002). Published by David Fulton, London.
• Symbols Literacy and Social Justice – edited by Chris Abbott (2003). Published by Widgit Software.

Further Information

Please contact Communication Matters for more information on this topic or to obtain other leaflets in the Focus on… series.

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Focus on...

Using Symbols for Communication

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Introduction
When you speak or write, your words act as symbols for what you are meaning. For instance, if you see a sign saying EXIT over a door you know that you are allowed to leave by that door. If someone asks you if you would like a cup of tea, you have a picture in your head of a hot drink served in a cup or a mug possibly with milk and/or sugar added. People who are unable to use words in the traditional sense because they are not able to speak need other symbol system available to them to get their message across.

There are a number of different symbol systems in common use in the UK. The most frequently used are Blissymbols™, Makaton™, Symbolstix™. There are also graphic symbol systems associated with specific high-tech communication aids, for example, Blissymbols™, Symbolstix™. There are also graphic symbol systems associated with specific high-tech communication aids, for example, Blissymbols™, Symbolstix™. These are designed to be used by people with complex communication and/or learning difficulties.

What is a Graphic or Pictorial Symbol?
Actually these are things we see all around us everyday. Traffic signs and signs with speech. Other symbol systems are more pictorial or graphic. This leaflet provides an overview of the main issues involved in using a graphic symbol system.

At airports there are symbols to show you where the departure and arrival gates are, public toilets usually have a picture on the door to let you know that you are allowed to leave by that door. If someone asks you if you would like a cup of tea, you have a picture in your head of a hot drink served in a cup or a mug possibly with milk and/or sugar added. People who are unable to use words in the traditional sense because they are not able to speak need other symbol system available to them to get their message across.

There are a number of different symbol systems in common use in the UK. The most frequently used are Blissymbols™, Makaton™, Symbolstix™. There are also graphic symbol systems associated with specific high-tech communication aids, for example, Blissymbols™, Symbolstix™. These are designed to be used by people with complex communication and/or learning difficulties.

How do I choose the right graphic symbol system?
Each graphic symbol system has its strengths and weaknesses. Choice of one particular symbol system over another should be based on the needs and abilities of the user and the symbol system chosen should be more pictorial than others. However, abstract language is always difficult to convey in a pictorial way. For example, how would you draw ‘through’, ‘tomorrow’ or ‘want’? The PCS for these words are shown on the left. Systems like Makaton use language themes to develop complex ideas.

Each graphic symbol system has to be taught to its users – some symbols are fairly guessable, others are not. Here are some which may be readily guessed:

- The type of computer software available for use with a particular symbol system
- The other symbol systems in use in the area (it is a good idea for schools and the facilities for adults in a particular area to use the same symbol system so that young people do not have to re-learn their communication system when they leave school)
- The type of computer software available for use with a particular symbol system.

Sometimes a particular symbol is ‘guessable’ because the user understands its component parts rather than because it looks like the object it relates to. Some of the more pictorial symbols have a lot of detail, which can be distracting for some users.

Here are some issues to be considered when choosing one graphic symbol system over another for a particular person:

- The visual abilities of the user.
- The number and range of symbols within the system.
- The cognitive and communication potential of the user. Will they need to have access to a large number of abstract words, or to symbols for grammatical elements?
- The teaching and support materials available.
- The other symbol systems in use in the area (it is a good idea for schools and the facilities for adults in a particular area to use the same symbol system so that young people do not have to re-learn their communication system when they leave school).

What do I do with these graphic symbols?
Symbols can be used to help both the person’s understanding of what is being said and as a means for them to express themselves. To use symbols as a means of communication you have to have some strategies for displaying them; this is quite a difficult task. Here are some suggestions:

- Grouping Symbols: If you are using a list of symbols you will probably need to think of some way of grouping them to make it easy for the user to find the one they want. Some symbol communication displays are grouped according to the topic, e.g. symbols for clothes are on one page, symbols for places on another. Other displays make use of grammar, so all describing words (e.g. ‘big’, ‘dirty’, ‘hungry’) are together, or all action words (e.g. ‘go’, ‘come’) are grouped together. Some are a combination of these two approaches, so action and describing words for a specific topic are placed on the same page, the topic nouns, e.g. ‘put on’, ‘take off’, ‘clean’, ‘dirty’ are grouped on the same page as items of clothing.

- Layout: Thinking how to display the symbols is something you might have to do for both high-tech and low-tech communication aids. Please see the leaflet Focus on... What is AAC? for information about high-tech and low-tech aids. You need to arrange the symbols so that it is easy and quick for the person to get to them. For example, you wouldn’t want the symbol for ‘toilet’ to be in a position that was difficult for the user to reach.

- Format: As well as thinking about how to arrange the symbols you need to think about the format of the communication display. Some people have their symbols displayed on a chart fixed to their wheelchair tray, others use a book with symbols arranged on the pages. Different sizes of books have their own pros and cons – a small book might be very easily carried around but is likely to contain fewer symbols than a large A4 folder. Some people might need different books for different situations. Topic boards can be useful for specific activities or places, for example a topic board could be used to allow an individual to take part in a story, or to play a game.

- Computer and Symbol Systems

There are a number of symbol computer programs available. Some programs are suitable for designing and printing communication displays. These would be used by therapists, teachers, carers, etc. Others are used in speech and language therapy development, for writing and email. These are designed to be used by people with complex communication and/or learning difficulties.

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How do I choose the right graphic symbol system?

Each graphic symbol system has its strengths and weaknesses. Choice of one particular symbol system over another should be based on the needs and abilities of the user of AAC. Some symbol systems are more pictorial than others. However, abstract language is always difficult to convey in a pictorial way. For example, how would you draw ‘through’, ‘tomorrow’ or ‘want’? The PCS symbols for these words are shown on the left. Systems like Makaton use language themes to develop complex ideas.

Each graphic symbol system has to be taught to its users – some symbols are fairly guessable, others are not. Here are some which may be readily guessed.

Most guessable symbols are those with no symbol set is used:

Sometimes a particular symbol is ‘guessable’ because the user understands its component parts rather than because it looks like the object it relates to. Some of the more pictorial symbols have a lot of detail, which can be distracting for some users.

Here are some issues to be considered when choosing one graphic symbol system over another for a particular person:

• The visual abilities of the potential user.
• The number and range of symbols within the system.
• The cognitive and communication potential of the user. Will they need to have access to a large number of abstract words, or to symbols for grammatical elements?
• The teaching and support materials available.
• The other symbol systems in use in the area (it is a good idea for schools and the facilities for adults in a particular area to use the same symbol system so that young people do not have to re-learn their communication system when they leave school).
• The type of computer software available for use with a particular symbol system.

What do I do with these graphic symbols?

Symbols can be used to help both the person’s understanding of what is being said and as a means for them to express themselves. To use AAC as a means of communication you have to have some strategies for displaying them; this is quite a difficult task. Here are some suggestions:

• Grouping Symbols: If you are using a list of symbols you will probably need to think of some way of grouping them to make it easier for the user to find the one they want. Some symbol communication displays group symbols according to the topic, e.g. symbols for clothes on one page, symbols for places on another. Other displays make use of grammar, so all describing words (e.g. ‘big’, ‘dirty’, ‘hungry’) are placed together; some action and descriptive words for a specific topic are placed on the same page, e.g. ‘put on’, ‘take off’. ‘Clean’, ‘dirty’ are grouped together.

• Layout: Thinking how to display the symbols is something you might have to do for both high-tech and low-tech communication aids. Please see the leaflet Focus on… What is AAC? for information about high-tech and low-tech aids. You need to arrange the symbols so that it is easy and quick for the person to get to them. For example, you wouldn’t want the symbol for ‘toilet’ to be in a position that was difficult for the user to reach.

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Computers and Symbol Systems

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Introduction
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There are a number of different symbol systems to help people communicate. These symbol systems are part of what is called augmentative and alternative communication, or AAC for short. Some of these symbol systems also involve the use of sign language; these are explained in the leaflet Focus on... Let your Hands do the Talking. Some systems like Makaton are multi-modal, using symbols and signs with speech. Other symbol systems are more pictorial or graphic. This leaflet provides an overview of the main issues involved in using a graphic symbol system.

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Layout: Thinking how to display the symbols is something you might have to do for both high-tech and low-tech communication aids. Please see the leaflet Focus on... What is AAC? for information about high-tech and low-tech aids. You need to arrange the symbols so that it is easy and quick for the person to get to them. For example, you wouldn’t want the symbol for ‘toilet’ to be in a position that was difficult to convey in a pictorial way. For example, how would you draw ‘through’, ‘tomorrow’ or ‘want’? The PCS symbols for these words are shown on the left. Systems like Makaton use language themes to develop complex ideas.

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- MInsymolos – Liberator Ltd, Minerva Business Park, Lynchwood, Peterborough, Cambs. P51 GTF. Tel: 0845 226 1144. Email: info@liberator.co.uk Website: www.liberator.co.uk
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Focus on...
Using Symbols for Communication

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Websites:

1Voice is a UK charity which promotes families supporting each other to overcome the isolation that being unable to speak can cause.

SCTCI (Scottish Centre of Technology for the Communication Impaired) (Education based)

CALL (Communication Access, Literacy, Learning) Scotland

Two national services for Scotland providing AAC information, support, training and equipment loans:

Communication Matters is the UK wide charity which works for people who use AAC. It acts as a central point of contact for AAC in Scotland, providing information and publications, Study Days, Focus On... Communication

AAC knowledge – The AAC Evidence Base

Websites:

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Communication Matters is the working name of ISAAC (UK) and Alternative Communication

Focus On... Communication

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