

COMMUNICATION MATTERS



Focus on...

Using Symbols for Communication



www.communicationmatters.org.uk



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 some other symbol system available to them to get their message across.

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 gestures or signs – 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.

What is a Graphic or Pictorial Symbol?

Actually these are things we see all around us everyday. Traffic signs are examples of pictorial symbols; some are more obvious and more pictorial than others are, but they all convey a message visually:



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 which one you should go into, and so on.

There are a number of graphic symbol systems in common use in the UK. The most frequently used are Blissymbols™, Makaton™, Picture Communication Symbols (PCS)™, Widgit Symbols (WS)™ and Symbolstix™. There are also graphic symbol systems associated with specific high-tech communication aids, for example, Minsymbols™ (multi-meaning icons) and Dynasyms™.



cat

(Blissymbol)



cat

(Symbolstix)



dog

(Blissymbol)



dog

(Symbolstix)



talk

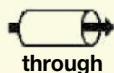
(WS)



talk

(PCS)

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 person using 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.

Every 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 similar, no matter which symbols 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 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 lot 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 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, and all action words (e.g. 'go', 'drive') 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 as 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 the 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. Topic boards can be useful in specific environments (e.g. at the sand tray, in the bathroom, at the supermarket). Symbols can be displayed permanently (e.g. on a laminated topic board) or temporarily using BluTak™ or Velcro™. Temporary symbol displays can be good for playing games, telling a story or for taking part in a discussion.

Computers 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 can be used to support literacy development, for writing and email. These are designed to be used by people with complex communication and/or learning difficulties.

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) is the term used to describe methods of communication which can be used to supplement the more usual methods of speech and writing when these are impaired.

AAC may include unaided systems such as signing and gesture, as well as aided techniques ranging from picture charts to the most sophisticated computer technology currently available. AAC can be a way to help someone understand, as well as a means of expression.

Contacts

- **Blissymbolics** – 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
- **Dynasyms** – 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. PE2 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, Cubbington, 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 (2000). 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.



Communication Matters / ISAAC (UK)
Leeds Innovation Centre, 103 Clarendon Road,
Leeds LS2 9DF, UK
Tel & Fax: 0845 456 8211
Email: admin@communicationmatters.org.uk
Website: www.communicationmatters.org.uk

Other topics in the 'Focus on...' series

Accessing communication aids and computers

Communicating with patients who have
speech/language difficulties

First steps

Let your hands do the talking

Speaking with someone who uses AAC

What can I say?

What is AAC?

These leaflets are funded by



who swam, ran and cycled
to fundraise for this CM resource



Copyright © 2001-2015 Communication Matters / ISAAC (UK)
Registered Charity No. 327500

ISAAC (UK) – Company limited by guarantee registered in England & Wales No. 01965474

3rd edition Published in 2015 by Communication Matters

The symbols in this leaflet are illustrative rather than to provide symbol support for reading

Blissymbols are © Blissymbolics Communication International 1982-2015
www.blissymbolics.org

Makaton symbols are © The Makaton Charity
www.makaton.org

PCS Symbols © Mayer-Johnson LLC 1981-2015
www.mayer-johnson.com/

Widgit Symbols are © Widgit Software 2015
www.widgit.com

Symbolstix™
www.cricksoft.com/uk/products/symbols/symbolstix.aspx