

COMMUNICATION MATTERS



Focus on...

Let your hands do the talking

Using signing systems
for communication



www.communicationmatters.org.uk



Introduction



Most of us use body language – facial expression, gesture, and so on. Sometimes this is totally unconscious and goes along with our speech to reinforce what we are saying. Sometimes our body language will reveal things we don't want other people to know, for example, that we are depressed, lying or embarrassed.



Whenever we are in situations where it is hard for us to speak, such as in a noisy pub or in a country where we do not speak the language, we rely more on our body language to get our message across. We tend to gesture more with our face and hands to explain what we mean.

For some people, body language and gestures are central to their communication rather than just accompanying their speech. These non-verbal methods of communication might be the only way they can express themselves.

Symbol and Signing Systems

If we can speak then our words act as symbols for what we are meaning. For example, if someone says, 'I've just bought a new car', you have a picture in your head of a shining new car – something you sit in, something which usually has four wheels, something made of metal and something which is expensive to keep! You also know what the other person means by 'bought' – they may have handed over a wad of notes, but more likely they have handed over a cheque or have arranged payment indirectly through the bank.



Some people use systems such as Makaton, Signalong or Signed English where only the key words are signed while other people benefit from having every word and word ending signed – for example British Sign Language or Sign Supported English.

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 around 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 are pictorial (these are explained in more detail in the leaflet Focus on... Using Symbols for Communication). Other symbol systems are based on manual signs or gestures.

This leaflet gives an overview of the main manual signing systems currently in use in the UK.

What signing systems are used?

There are many signing systems, including British Sign Language (BSL), which are used almost exclusively by the deaf community. Here are some of the more frequently used signing and gesture systems used in the UK with people with complex communication needs as part of an AAC system:

Finger Spelling / Manual Alphabet: uses hand positions to represent letters. People in the deaf community use the two-handed form. One-handed versions are used by people with hemiplegia. Some people who are both deaf and partially sighted use a tactile form.

Makaton Signs: a basic vocabulary based on some of the signs of BSL. Only the key words in the utterance are signed. Makaton is used alongside spoken English. This vocabulary was originally designed to be used with people with learning disabilities to help them understand spoken language and to allow a basic form of self-expression. It is now used with a wide range of people with complex communication needs.

Signalong: like Makaton, is based on BSL. Signing is used at the same time as spoken English, and follows English word order, with only the key words being signed.

On body signs e.g. Canaan Barrie: A sign vocabulary adapted for children with visual impairment and additional support needs. Most of these signs have a reference point on the body and give auditory feedback, or involve movements close to child. The signs are simplified and do not involve complex manipulative skill. The adapted sign vocabulary reflects the everyday routines, needs and interests of the child with visual impairment.

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.

What are the Pros and Cons of using a signing system?

Signing, like speaking, is an unaided form of communication in that it does not need the communicator to use another object or piece of equipment to get their message across. It can therefore be a very spontaneous and immediate form of communication. Of all the forms of AAC, it is the most like speech – you are not having to communicate via an aid. The main difficulty with signing and gesture systems is that everybody has to learn the system. If the person who uses AAC tries to communicate through signs and gestures to people who do not know the system then they are not likely to be very successful because their communication partners possibly will not understand them. For someone to learn to communicate by signing and to value it as a method of communication, everybody in their environment needs to sign for at least part of the time.

Why use gesture and sign if the person is not deaf?

Signs and gestures provide a visual reinforcement to what is being said. Some people with severe communication difficulties also have problems understanding and remembering what is said to them. Signing and gesturing, as well as speaking, can provide the individual with additional clues which can help them to understand.

When signing is used as part of an AAC system, it is really important to remember to speak as well as to sign. Many people who use signing as part of their total communication system can hear at least some of what is said to them. Signing is used to help them to understand what is being said, rather than to replace speech. When someone with unclear speech uses signs along with their speech, it can really help other people to understand what they are saying. Signing can have benefits for both communication partners in a conversation.



HORSE

Both closed hands held on top of each other (like 'G') make up and down movement in front of body (as if holding reins).



Horse

**BSL and Makaton
sign for 'horse'**

Useful Resources

- **British Sign Language**
Website: www.british-sign.co.uk
- **The Makaton Charity**, Westmead House, Farnborough, Hampshire GU14 7LP. Tel: 01276 606760.
Email: info@makaton.org
Website: www.makaton.org
- **The Signalong Group**, Stratford House, Waterside Court, Neptune Close, Rochester, Kent ME2 4NZ Tel: 01634 727087.
Email: info@signalong.org.uk
Website: www.signalong.org.uk
- **Canaan-Barrie Sign system** in Lee, M. and MacWilliam, L. (2008) *Learning Together*. London: RNIB
- There are plenty of online resources on the Communication Matters website: **www.communicationmatters.org.uk/**
- Why not join the AAC Forum to find out more from people who use and work with AAC. Instructions on how to join are available here:
www.communicationmatters.org.uk/page/aac-forum
- Communication Matters is also on Facebook:
www.facebook.com/communicationmattersuk
and Twitter: **@Comm_Matters**
- The AACknowledge website is for those interested in the latest research, summarised in Plain English:
www.aacknowledge.org.uk/
- AAC E-Learning is a 20 minute online course on an introduction to AAC:
www.aacelearning.org.uk/



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

Speaking with someone who uses AAC

Using symbols for communication

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

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