Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)
---Step-by-Step Guide---

This practice guide outlines how to plan for, use, and monitor the Picture Exchange Communication System practice.

Keep in mind that PECS teacher the learner to use visual-graphic symbols to communicate with others.

BEFORE YOU START...

Each of the following points is important to address so that you can be sure the selected EBP is likely to address the learning needs of your student.

Have you found out more information about. . .?

☐ Identified the behavior...

☐ Collected baseline data through direct observation...

☐ Established a goal or outcome that clearly states when the behavior will occur, what the target skill is, and how the team will know when the skill is mastered...

If the answer to any of these is "no," review the process of how to select an EBP.

For more information visit:
www.afirm.fpg.unc.edu

Now you are ready to start...

Step 1: PECS Planning

The planning step how to conduct a reinforcer sampling and prepare materials for PECS.

1.1 Receive PECS training from a certified PECS Training

This module is not intended to take the place of training provided by Pyramid Educational Consultants, Inc. For information on training and resources provided, visit the Pyramid Educational Consultants, Inc. website at http://www.pecsusa.com.

1.2 Establish performance criteria for program goals

A minimum of two adults are needed to implement PECS. One adult is identified as the "helper" and the other adult as the "communicative partner".

1.3 Conduct a reinforcer sampling

Reinforcers are needed for using PECS. A reinforcer sampling can be used to identify reinforcers for individual learner.

The **PECS Reinforcer Sampling** found in the Resource section will help you identify potential reinforcers to use with the learner.

1.4 Conduct assessments

Determine the learner's current communication skills. The information collected through assessments, will help team members determine target skills for PECS training (for example, requesting, initiating interactions) and types of prompts that can be used to facilitate communicative exchanges.

1.5 Prepare communication pictures/symbols and books

No specific pictures or symbols are required for PECS. Select the pictures/symbols that are the easiest to create and use. A designated communication book is needed to store all commonly used pictures/symbols. Plan for creating at least two copies of the communication book for use when the learner begins using PECS across settings and with different communicative partners.

Step 2: Using PECS

This section describes the process of using PECS and each phase of instruction.

2.1 Implement Phase 1: Teaching the physically assisted exchange

The goal of Phase 1 is for the learner with ASD to look at, reach for, pick up, and hand the picture/symbol to the communicative partner. To accomplish this goal, address the following:

- Arrange the training environment by creating opportunities for learning should be available in both a structured and unstructured environment. In a structured training environment, the learner with ASD should be across from the communicative partner, with a helper seated behind or beside the learner to assist in developing the desired actions. To help learners generalize the use of newly acquired skills across settings, activities, and people, PECS training can occur in unstructured environments such as during center time, recess, or lunch.
- Helper physically prompts the learner's communicative exchange with communicative partner. During this stage, no verbal prompts are used with the learner to increase the learner's independence and reduce the learner's reliance upon others during communicative exchanges.
- Reward learner with reinforcer (desired item) once the learner gives the picture/symbol to the communicative partner AND the communicative partner labels the item.
- Gradually reduce the amount of assistance so that few or no prompts are needed for the learner to initiate and complete an exchange by using backward chaining. As the learner becomes more independent during communicative exchanges and less physical assistance from the helper is required, the communicative partner can begin to fade the open-hand prompt.
- The learner meets basic skills of Phase 1 and is ready to move to Phase 2 when the learner is:
    o Reaching for the high-interest item
    o Picking up the picture/symbol of the item,
    o Handing the picture/symbol to the communicative partner
    o Acquiring high interest item

2.2 Implement Phase 2: Expanding spontaneity

The goal of Phase 2 is for the learner with ASD to increase spontaneity and generalization of the picture exchange. To accomplish this goal, address the following:
- Increase the number and variety of reinforcer items to prevent satiation.
- The learner with ASD should exchange pictures/symbols with more communicative partners selected from individuals with whom the learner interacts on a regular basis.
- To increase generalization of the communicative exchange, instruction should occur in a variety of natural environments such as home, school, and community.
- The learner should seek out the communication book in order to request items from a partner. To expand the spontaneity of communicative exchanges, use the following two traveling activities: 1) increase the distance to the communicative partner and 2) increase the distance from the communication book.
- The learner meets skills of Phase 2 and is ready to move to Phase 3 when the learner is:
    o Traveling to communicative partner (distance)
    o Traveling to communication book (distance).

Step 2: Using PECS (continued)

2.3 Implement Phase 3: Simultaneous discrimination of pictures

The goal of Phase 3 is for the learner to attend to the pictures/symbols in order to discriminate between them. To accomplish this goal, address the following:

- When beginning Phase 3, the communication book will only include two pictures/symbols. One picture should be a known, highly reinforcing item or an item appropriate for the situation. The second picture is a non-preferred or unrelated item. It is very important to reinforce the learner's selection of the correct picture as soon as it happens.
- If learners do not learn this skill as quickly, they will need specific instruction. For these learners, use the 4-step error correction procedure.
- Once the learner can discriminate between two pictures/symbols, additional pictures/symbols are introduced to allow for the learner to request from multiple picture/symbol options.
- Use correspondence checks to ensure that the learner is requesting and taking the item for which he or she is asking.
- The learner meets skills of Phase 3 and is ready to move to Phase 4 when the learner is:
    o Independently discriminating between 12 to 20 pictures/symbols
    o Accurately discriminating between 3 or pictures/symbols presented as options
    o Independently traveling to and from communication book to initiate exchange.

2.4 Implement Phase 4: Building sentence structure

The goal of Phase 4 is for the learner to spontaneously make requests using simple sentence structure. To accomplish this goal, address the following:

- Introduce the sentence strip to the learner by placing the "I want" symbol on the left side of sentence strip, Communicative partner guides learner to place the selected picture/symbol next to "I want" symbol on sentence strip. After the learner removes the sentence strip (with assistance if needed) and hands it to the communicative partner, the communicative partner reads the sentence pointing to each symbol/picture. Use backward chaining to fade assistance.
- After the communicative partner reads, "I want," and before naming the requested item, the communicative partner should pause to promote verbalization.
- The learner meets skills of Phase 4 and is ready to move to Phase 5 when the learner is:
    o Placing the "I want" symbol on the strip.
    o Placing picture/symbol on strip
    o Exchanging the strip with communicative partner
    o Pointing to pictures/symbols.

Step 2: Using PECS (continued)

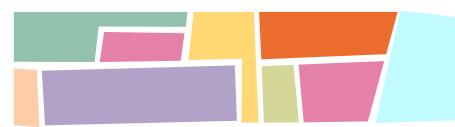### 2.5 Implement Phase 5: Responding to "What do you want?"

The goal of Phase 5 is for the learner to increase initiations and for the learner to answer the question, "What do you want?" To accomplish this goal, address the following:

- To begin teaching the learner to respond to the question, "What do you want?" use a 0-second delay. Simultaneously point to the "I want" card and ask the learner "What do you want."
- As the learner demonstrates ability to complete the sentence strip and the exchange, increase the interval of the delay. The communicative partner should encourage the learner to complete the exchange prior to the point prompt.
- The learner meets skills of Phase 5 and is ready to move to Phase 6 when the learner is:
  - Responding and requesting without prompts
  - Beating the prompt for the delay interval used.

2.6 Implement Phase 6: Commenting in response to a question

The goal of Phase 6 is for the learner to use labeling and naming. To accomplish this goal, address the following:

- Add a new symbol to represent the concept of "I see" to the communication book.
- Introduce commenting in response to the question, "What do you see?" by holding up a selected item and asking the question. The communicative partner physically assists learner in picking up "I see" symbol and placing it on the sentence strip. The communicative partner waits 5 seconds, If learner places the picture/symbol on sentence strip and gives it to communicative partner, provide praise and a reinforcer (not item being held by communicative partner. If the learner does not, the communicative partner should provide physical assistance. Gradually add pictures/symbols and items for the learner to discriminate among.
- Two teach differentiated responses, add the question "What do you want?" Then add other questions such as "What do you hear?" or "What do you have?"
- To encourage a learner to comment without being questioned first, create interesting environmental events and fade questions.
- The learner has acquired the needed skills for Phase 6 when the learner is:
  - Making spontaneous requests
  - Making spontaneous comments.

Step 3: Monitoring PECS

The following process describes how the use of PECS can be monitored and how to adjust your plan based on the data.

3.1 Collect data on target behavior/skills

By collecting data on target behaviors and skills, team members are able to determine if the learner is making progress. To purchase these resources, visit the Pyramid Educational Consultants ™ website at http://www.pecsusa.com.

3.2 Determine next steps based on learner progress

Collecting data will help team members determine if the learner is ready to move to the next phase of PECS. If the learner is making progress based upon data collected, team members should continue to use PECS.

If the learner with ASD is not showing progress, ask yourself the following questions:
- Do the preferred items need to be changed?
- Do additional preferred items need to be added?
- Are selected reinforcing items motivating to the learner?
- Is the correct level of prompting or physical assistance being used?
- Does the learner need to address skills acquired in a previous Phase?
- Is PECS being used with fidelity? (Use the PECS Implementation Checklist to determine fidelity.)
- Has a team member been trained to use PECS? (See Pyramid Educational Consultants ™ website for training opportunities at http://www.pecsusa.com.)

If these issues have been addressed and the learner with ASD continues not to show progress, consider selecting a different evidence-based practice to use with the learner with ASD.