



## THE BENEFITS OF TEACHING SIGN LANGUAGE TO CHILDREN WITH AUTISM

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## AUGMENTATIVE ALTERNATIVE COMMUNICATION

- The benefits of teaching students with autism augmentative and alternative communication when speech is lacking or limited has long been documented
- The majority of systems utilised are based on visual discrimination, for example Picture Exchange Communication System, or computer and voice generative devices
- Lack of research that demonstrates the superiority of either system

## WHAT WE DO KNOW

- All students with autism can learn to communicate effectively through AAC
- Many of those students will develop speech as a result of using AAC
- The use of AAC needs to be integrated in a “total communication” programme where the production of speech is also a target
- The starting point should be the “request” (mand)

## ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF SIGN LANGUAGE

ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
Portability	Universality
Response efficiency	Speed of acquisition of initial signs
Comprehensive	Poor imitation may hinder acquisition
Topography based	

## WHY TEACH SIGN LANGUAGE

- To compensate for the absence of speech
- To support existing speech
- To support comprehension
- To replace challenging behaviour with a communication function

## PRIOR CONSIDERATIONS:

- The student’s current repertoire (imitation, visual skills)
- The student’s environment
- Parental preference
- The student’s age

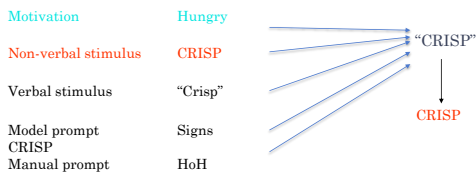
## HOW TO START

- The starting point is the same as with vocal requests (mands): the manipulation of motivation
- PAIRING
- IDENTIFY REINFORCERS
- MAKE THOSE INACCESSIBLE
- AS STUDENT APPROACHES YOU...

## PROMPTING SEQUENCE

- 1) Student demonstrates desire to obtain item
- 2) Instructor models sign - and says word
- 3) Prompts the student (hand manipulation) – and says word
- 4) Gives item – and says word

## TEACHING MANDS



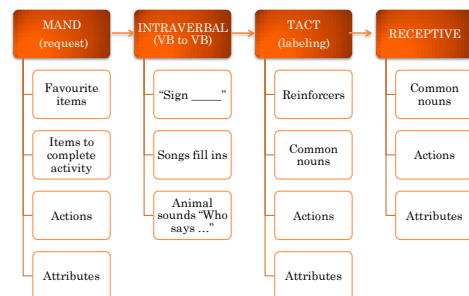
## CHOOSING SIGNS

- We generally recommend starting with 5 iconic signs (the sign "looks" like the item)
  - 1 or 2 favourite foods
  - 1 drink
  - 1 toy
  - 1 physical activity

## EFFECTIVE TEACHING

- Begin in the Natural Environment
- Provide hundreds of learning opportunities
- Try to be at least 20 signs ahead of the student
- Correct scrolling

## EARLY CURRICULUM PROGRESSION



## IMPROVING VOCALISATIONS

- Based on the research on stimulus-stimulus pairing and automatic reinforcement
- By pairing signs and spoken words and reinforcers during communication teaching words or speech sounds may become conditioned reinforcers or even automatic reinforcers.
- If sign and word become paired, the emission of the sign may evoke the word, thus becoming a self-prompt for the student to say the corresponding word

## SUMMARY OF PROCEDURE

- When teaching sign language always say the word when the student emits the sign and when reinforcement is delivered
- As the student begins to make sound approximations, reinforce differentially
- As the student makes that sound reliably when producing the sign, delay the delivery of the reinforcer and attempt to shape a better approximation. Deliver on third attempt anyway.

## WHEN TO FADE SIGNS

- If signs stop being reinforced before speech is intelligible, the student will cease to use signs, with the result of loss of vocabulary and continued absence of discriminable speech.
- One should cease teaching new signs only when speech is comprehensible on most occasions by a stranger not familiar with the student.

**THANK YOU FOR YOUR  
ATTENTION!**

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