Focus on...

First steps

Developing communication skills for individuals with multiple disabilities

which feels similar to the car seat or to the seat belt, or maybe use a car key. These objects can include special features such as textures, tastes, sounds and smells.

You will have to teach the person that these objects have a meaning, for example, that they are going for a ride in the car. There should be consistency of objects across various settings e.g. home and school.

Using Photographs

Some people are able to look at photographs and understand what they mean. Instead of using objects of reference you could maybe use photographs of familiar objects around the house, such as toys, fruit, TV, family and friends. Photographs can be used in exactly the same way as objects of reference that is:

• to let the individual know what is going to happen

• to let them choose what they want to do
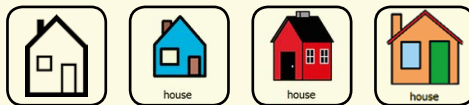
• to let them tell you something.

Using Pictures and Symbols

Pictures and symbols can be useful as a way of making communication less specific. For instance, a photograph of a particular house really only relates to that specific one. However, a more abstract symbol of a house, for example, could mean 'I go home', 'that's my house?', 'it's home time', and so on.

There are several different symbol systems used in the UK including Picture Communication Symbols™, Widgit Symbols™, SymbolsStix™ Makaton symbols and Blissymbols™.

See *Focus on...Using Symbols for Communication* for more information about using symbols.

Signs, Objects, Photographs and Symbols in the Environment

It is important that the person with multiple disabilities has access to their means of communication at all times. It can be useful to have their communication method visible, for instance:

• a timetable of the day displayed three dimensionally using objects of reference

• appropriate photographs or symbols on the wall

• appropriate pictures up close to specific activity areas.

You might have to say to the person, 'Show me how you say YES', 'Show me how you say NO'. People who are not able to speak have developed a whole range of methods for indicating 'yes' and 'no', for example:

- looking up for 'yes' and down for 'no'
- blinking their eyes once for 'yes' and twice for 'no'
- a tight fist for 'yes' or an open hand for 'no'
- pointing at the words 'yes' and 'no' printed on cards
- moving their foot up for 'yes' and keeping it still for 'no'

Finding a system for signalling reliable 'yes' and 'no' that can be understood by a range of people can take some time. However, it provides a good starting point for future communication. It is important to have details of this system available for unfamiliar communication partners. Often the person will carry a simple 'Communication Passport' that will explain their system.

Using Signs and Gestures

Signs and gestures provide a visual clue to what is being said. Some people with severe speech 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 what is being said. For some people body language, natural gestures and signs might be the most effective way they have to express themselves.

The leaflet *Focus on...Let your Hands do the Talking* provides information on using signs and gestures as a method of communication.

Using Objects

Real objects can be used to encourage people to choose; for example, holding up a bottle of water and a bottle of orange to give someone a choice of drink. Objects can be used to let an individual know what is going to happen; for example, letting someone feel their swimming costume before putting it in a bag might let that person know that they were going swimming. Objects used in this way are sometimes called 'objects of reference'.

If you are using objects of reference as a means of communication you need to think about how that object will make sense to the person you are using it with. If you are not able to see, then a toy car bears little resemblance to the experience of going in a car. You cannot see that the toy car is a miniaturised version of the real thing. It does not feel like a real car, it does not sound like one, smell like one, or feel like it does when you are motoring along. It would be better to use some other aspect of the real car as the object of reference — the 'signifier' for a real car— such as a piece of material

which feels similar to the car seat or to the seat belt, or maybe use a car key. These objects can include special features such as textures, tastes, sounds and smells.

You will have to teach the person that these objects have a meaning, for example, that they are going for a ride in the car. There should be consistency of objects across various settings e.g. home and school.

Using Photographs

Some people are able to look at photographs and understand what they mean. Instead of using objects of reference you could maybe use photographs of familiar objects around the house, such as toys, fruit, TV, family and friends. Photographs can be used in exactly the same way as objects of reference that is:

• to let the individual know what is going to happen

• to let them choose what they want to do

• to let them tell you something.

Using Pictures and Symbols

Pictures and symbols can be useful as a way of making communication less specific. For instance, a photograph of a particular house really only relates to that specific one. However, a more abstract symbol of a house, for example, could mean 'I go home', 'that's my house?', 'it's home time', and so on.

There are several different symbol systems used in the UK including Picture Communication Symbols™, Widgit Symbols™, SymbolsStix™ Makaton symbols and Blissymbols™.

See *Focus on...Using Symbols for Communication* for more information about using symbols.

Signs, Objects, Photographs and Symbols in the Environment

It is important that the person with multiple disabilities has access to their means of communication at all times. It can be useful to have their communication method visible, for instance:

• a timetable of the day displayed three dimensionally using objects of reference

• appropriate photographs or symbols on the wall

• appropriate pictures up close to specific activity areas.

> **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.

Other Useful Resources

Michelle Finds a Voice

This book is a story about a young adult with disabilities who is unable to communicate effectively but is helped to overcome her communication difficulties. Her story is told through pictures alone (there is also text at the back of the book to provide one possible narrative).

Published by The Royal College of Psychiatrists and St George's Hospital Medical School A new edition will be produced by www.booksbeyondwords.co.uk

Other Ways of Speaking

This booklet gives examples on the ways children may use AAC at home and at school. It is free and available from Communication Matters.

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

Let your hands do the talking

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