

This week's PODD communication focus...

Using Categories



- PODD communication systems have been designed to allow the child to control the movement between pages (navigation) using the 'go to page (number)' instructions and operational commands such as 'go to categories'. This enables them to have **communicative autonomy**, meaning that they are in control of **what they want to say, when they want to say it**. Initially, communication partners assist children to navigate through their book as they learn the location of specific vocabulary and how to use these 'operational' functions.
- The main navigation index consists of 'pragmatic branch starters' (eg. I'm asking a question, I'm telling you something, I want) and 'category/section names' (eg. people, activities, descriptions).
- Pragmatic branch starters are a compensatory tool that allow the communication intent to be established for 1-2 word messages. In speech, the intent would usually be clear through the intonation, gesture and other environmental supports. However, using AAC, if a child used the categories index alone to say, for example, 'shop', it would be unclear exactly what their intent was. Using pragmatic branches, the intent becomes more obvious – 'Let's go – shop' OR 'Let's pretend – places – shop' OR 'I'm telling you something – it's already happened – places – shop'.

*"There is no equivalent to intonation inherent in the use of aided symbols. Children who use aided symbols may have limited physical ability to use the facial expressions and actions typically used to support the interpretation of 1-2 word sentences. The partner has to interpret the meaning of 1-2 aided symbol sentences from the context and their knowledge of the child. **As a child's communication skills increase to sentences of 3 or more words, reliance on the use of pragmatic branch starters decreases.**"*

(Porter, 2007, p. 19)

Given the above information, it is important when modelling communication to always look for a suitable pragmatic branch starter to convey your message intent, before using the categories index. For example,

- 'I'm asking a question – What – go to categories – actions – like, do. *What would you like to do?*'
- 'I'm telling you something – It's time to – house and garden – go bedroom – bed. *It's time to go to bed.*

The categories in PODD may be based on parts of speech (e.g. action words, description words, little words), semantic associations (food/drink; clothes; activities), or pragmatic function (opinions, something's wrong). Using categories allows sentences with multiple words and more specific meanings to be constructed. For example,

- 'I like this – clever – go to categories – actions – movements – kicking'
- 'I'm telling you something – it's going to happen – places – go (turn the page) zoo – go to categories – (turn the page) days and times – tomorrow'
- 'I'm telling you something – it's about now – animals – wild/zoo animals – monkey – go to categories – actions – movements – climbing'

When providing partner assisted scanning for your child, remember to scan the navigational column (go back to page ..., oops, go to categories), as this gives them the opportunity to independently build longer, more specific sentences. If your child seems stuck or their message is still unclear, you can then suggest to 'go to categories'.

"...experience using the PODD communication books has demonstrated that children less than two years, and older children with significant cognitive challenges, have learned to access vocabulary via a category index, despite an inability to successfully complete other categorisation tasks. It is hypothesised that frequent experiences seeing categories used by others to communicate messages (aided language stimulation) allowed these children to learn to use categories as part of the language structure (semantics/syntax) they use to communicate, prior to the development of categorization as a cognitive task."

(Porter, 2007, p. 27)