

7

Advanced Lessons within PECS

Sophie had learned to request her favorite candy, Skittles, using the Sentence Strip. Whenever we offered her a handful of Skittles, Sophie carefully inspected the choices and took only the red Skittles. If offered other colored Skittles, she pushed them aside. We realized that Sophie could select by color even though we had not yet used color within any lesson. The next time she requested a Skittle with her Sentence Strip, we said “Which one?” We provided a symbol for “red” on her PECS book and she quickly learned to form the sentence “I want...RED...Skittle.” Soon, we found other objects for which color was important to Sophie and she used her new symbol whenever it helped clarify what she wanted.

Expanding Sentence Structure

There are two types of extensions to the use of the Sentence Strip introduced at the end of Chapter 6. One involves expanding on the type of request a child can produce by learning to use attributes such as color, size, shape, etc. The other involves the acquisition of new communication functions (i.e., learning to comment rather than request).

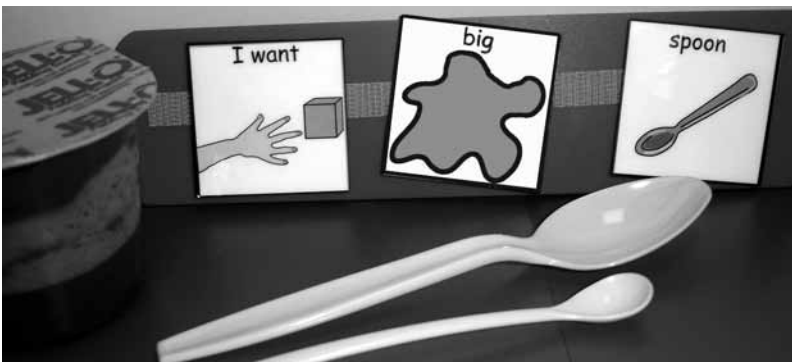
Phase Four (continued): Expanding Requests with Attributes

Once a child has learned how to use the Sentence Strip to make direct requests, we can teach him to clarify what he is requesting. As

in the example with Sophie, first we noticed that particular colors of candy were important to her, so we taught her how to communicate her preference. We also began to design lessons in which color was made to be important. For example, we placed her favorite toy within a box that had a red cover and placed that box alongside a blue-covered box. To get access to her toy, she needed to request, “I want...RED...box.” We designed additional “hiding” games to teach a variety of concepts.

Gary loved chocolate chip cookies and had learned to use a Sentence Strip to request them. We noticed that if we held a large cookie in one hand and a small piece of cookie in our other hand, Gary invariably reached for the larger piece. In this situation, Gary paid attention to issues related to size—he wanted the big cookie. We then created a symbol for “big” (i.e., a blob or splotch that fills most of the symbol area) and Gary learned to specify which piece of cookie he preferred.

In this example, Gary could choose appealing items by their size. However, while it may seem easy to get a child to ask for the larger cookie, how do we teach him to request things that are small? One way is to offer choices in which only the small item fits the situation. For example, if a child could request a spoon to eat pudding out of a small plastic container, giving the child a choice between a regular-sized spoon and the kitchen ladle would increase the appeal of the smaller spoon. Of course, to be certain the child was selecting by the relative size of the spoons, we would later need to offer a choice between the regular spoon and Barbie’s spoon! Another approach to this lesson would be to hide a desired item in objects that varied by size. For example, we could put a piece of candy in a small plastic egg while placing tissue paper inside a large plastic egg.



The vocabulary for other attributes, including number, positions, placement, and texture, can be introduced within the request function of PECS. (See Table 7-1.) Such lessons tend to be far more motivating to children than lessons involving understanding. Traditionally, attributes (sometimes referred to as “cognitive skills” or “conceptual vocabulary”) have been taught to children with autism by placing in front of the student objects varying in the target attribute and telling the child to select by that attribute. For example, we would place a red circle and a blue circle before the child and say, “Touch red. Touch blue,” or some similar

Table 7-1 | Attributes

Type of Attribute	Common Objects with Potential Motivators
Color	Candy, crayons, blocks, Legos, clothes, juice, Skittles, jelly beans, Starburst
Size a) big vs. little b) long vs. short	Whole cookie vs. crumb, spoons that fit container Pretzel rods, string, “Fruit-by-the-Foot,” licorice laces, bubble wands
Shape	Crackers, cookies, cookie cutters, form board puzzles
Location	Candy by the chair vs. candy by the table (one he likes, one he dislikes). For example, “I want... cookie...chair” meaning “I want the cookie on the chair, not the one that’s on the floor”
Prepositions	Toy ON the chair vs. toy UNDER the chair (one he likes, one he dislikes). In this case, “on” is providing critical information about which item is desired.
Quantity	10 toy cars rather than 1 toy car
Temperature	Cold drink vs. hot drink, room temperature glitter wand vs. frozen glitter wand
Texture	Smooth cloth vs. rough cloth for back rubs, plain vs. salted pretzel, rough- vs. smooth-edged potato chips, lumpy vs. smooth cottage-cheese, smooth vs. textured ball, smooth vs. textured Tangle Toy
Cleanliness	Clean towel vs. dirty towel
Body Parts	Mr. Potato Head; placement of Band-Aids, stickers, lotion, ink stamps, temporary tattoos, brushing
Action words	“hit,” “bounce,” “throw,” “catch” the ball

phrase. When the child correctly responded, we would then praise him, possibly providing an additional reward. Using the request function within PECS involves items that clearly are important to the child. The reward for successful requests is receiving the item the child specified.

Designing Effective Lessons Involving Attributes

Materials needed:

Items that vary only along the dimension associated with the attribute to be taught. (See the table above for examples of attributes and potential common objects.)

Prerequisites:

Before teaching a particular attribute within PECS, be sure that the child shows a preference associated with that attribute in terms of real items (not necessarily communicatively). For example, a child who selectively picks out red candies to eat, the blue crayon to draw with, or the white paper to draw on is demonstrating actions governed by color as an attribute dimension. In such cases, it will be very motivating to the child using PECS to request items with that specific feature.

It is very important to avoid confusing a child “knowing” or “responding to” an attribute with communicating about the attribute or understanding our attempts to communicate about that attribute. For example, we have met many teachers who were convinced that their student could not master “big” vs. “little.” These teachers had done hours and hours of drills on “touch big” and “touch little” with various sized circles or squares, to no avail. However, with these same students, if I approached with a whole (big) cookie in one hand and a cookie crumb (little) in my other hand, I noticed that these students reliably took the big cookie and did not randomly respond (as long as they liked cookies!). The trick may be to separate the visual skill (or the skill associated with other senses such as touch, hearing, etc.) from the communicative skill associated with that sensory property.

If the child does not show a natural inclination to select by color, it may be possible to test his ability to visually discriminate by color without requiring communicative understanding. For example, assume that Lisa likes cookies. While she is watching, put a cookie inside an open, white-sided shoebox. You do not need to say, “Where

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