

You've heard about PECS, but do you really know what it is?

The Myths and Misconceptions Surrounding the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS®)

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Over the past ten years or so, PECS has become an acronym that is well recognized in the field of autism intervention. While many people have heard of PECS, though, there are a lot of myths and misconceptions about what the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS®) really is. Outlined below are some of the most common myths.

If we're using pictures of any kind, we're using PECS.

PECS does use pictures, but it is a specific protocol for teaching **expressive** use of pictures for an individual to communicate wants and needs, and to comment about the world. The protocol involves 6 distinct phases of teaching, as well as strategies for introducing attributes (e.g. colour and size) into the individual's language. It combines knowledge from the fields of applied behaviour analysis and speech-language pathology to produce an effective and efficient method for teaching **functional communication**. The teaching protocol was developed by Andy Bondy, PhD, and Lori Frost, SLP/CCC, in 1985 and is now described, in its most up-to-date version, in the **Picture Exchange Communication System Training Manual – 2nd Edition (Bondy & Frost, 2002)**. This training manual is recognized by professionals in the fields of communication and behaviour analysis as an effective and practical guide to one of the most innovative systems available.

We're using a visual schedule, so we're using PECS.

PECS is an **expressive** communication system for the individual with severe communication impairment. Visual schedules are about **receptive** understanding. The Pyramid Approach to Education, of which PECS is a part, will make use of visual schedules, but they are not PECS per se.

PECS is only for people who don't speak at all.

PECS can provide a very effective functional communication system to individuals with no verbal communication, but it can also teach important skills to those who talk. The PECS protocol emphasises teaching a person to approach others to initiate a communication interaction. Some people may talk, but don't understand that need for a social approach – they may talk to an empty room or to the fridge. These individuals may be able to learn about the social approach through PECS. Other people may talk, but will only do so if asked a question or told to use their words. These individuals may be able to learn about spontaneous, self-initiated communication through PECS. PECS can be an alternative communication system for those who don't speak or an augmentative communication system for those who do.

PECS is only for young children.

PECS has been used around the world with people aged from 14 months to 85 years. While the learning process may be different for people at different ages or with different types of communication impairment, PECS can be an effective functional communication system right across the age range.

PECS just teaches people to request.

Requesting is the first skill taught in PECS, but the protocol's final phase focuses on teaching commenting (e.g. I see, I hear, I smell). PECS is not about a person just getting his/her needs and desires met, but about communicating with other people in his/her world.

If a person asks for something using PECS, we have to honour the request, and that will just produce a "spoilt brat".

The PECS protocol involves honouring every request during Phases I and II. This is the time when the person learning PECS is developing his/her trust in the communication system. If we start saying "No" too early, the person learning PECS may give up trying to communicate, because his/her experience is that it doesn't always work. Once the individual has mastered Phase II of PECS, we can be confident that s/he is a persistent communicator, and it then becomes appropriate to teach the concept that a person can ask for what s/he wants, but the answer will sometimes be "No".

If we use PECS, the person using the system won't learn to speak.

As with any other alternative communication system, the use of PECS will increase the likelihood that a person will become a verbal communicator. Research has been carried out looking at the emergence of speech in PECS users, and the results indicate that speech may well be an outcome of PECS. What we also know, though, is that even if a person doesn't start to speak with PECS, that person will have an effective way of communicating with lots of different people in his/her world.

PECS is only for people with autism.

PECS was developed at the Delaware Autism Program in the United States and did therefore have its origins in the field of autism intervention. What has been discovered over the 20 years since the inception of PECS, though, is that it can serve as an effective communication system for a range of individuals with communication impairment. PECS is being used with individuals with autism, Down syndrome, Cri-du-Chat, Angelman's syndrome, developmental delay, language disorder, developmental verbal dyspraxia, head injury ... and the list goes on.

In summary ...

The Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS®, Bondy & Frost, 2002) is a unique augmentative/alternative communication training protocol that has received worldwide recognition for focusing on the initiation component of communication. PECS does not require complex or expensive materials. It was created with educators, resident care providers and families in mind, and so is readily used in a variety of settings. The system has been successful with individuals who have a wide array of communicative, cognitive and physical difficulties.

Training in the Picture Exchange Communication System is available through Pyramid Educational Consultants, a worldwide group of companies headed by Andy Bondy and Lori Frost. Our Pyramid consultants work closely as a team with Dr. Bondy and Ms. Frost to maintain their expertise and to update any PECS protocol modifications that are made.

If you would like to know more about Pyramid Educational Consultants or PECS, go to www.pecsaustralia.com or call (08) 8240 3811.

Thank you to those who attended the recent PECS workshop at Western Autistic School, and to my Pyramid colleagues around the world, for helping me to collect and identify the common myths that surround PECS.