

COMMUNICATION TOOLS

This fact sheet has been written by parent carers for parent carers



What are communication tools?

When a person has a communication difficulty, which may be because of a condition such as autism, cerebral palsy, a learning disability, or due to a brain injury or degenerative illness, they may need tools or alternative ways to communicate. This fact sheet will cover some of the communication tools available, as well as signposting you to places that can help you and give further information on your options so that you can choose the best communication tools for your child or young person.

Who benefits from using communication tools?

We all know how important communication is. It allows us to interact with other people and to express our needs as well as our likes and dislikes. If a person has speech and language difficulties, finding other ways to help them communicate using whatever tool(s) are best for them allows them to express their views. It ensures they have a say in everything from day-to-day choices to important decisions, wherever possible, which will have a positive impact on their self-esteem and mental health.

Types of communication tools

Finding the communication tools that are most suitable to your child will depend on their individual needs and abilities. Tools include: gestures and sign language, pictures, communication boards, tablets and speech-generating devices. Sometimes these tools are referred to as 'Augmentative and Alternative Communication', or AAC for short. Your child's Speech and Language Therapist (SALT) will be able to advise you on which ones would be most helpful for your child.

Communication tools can be divided into two categories:

Unaided tools

These are low-tech and do not use extra equipment. Instead, they rely on things such as a person's facial expressions, ability to gesture and make vocalisations and or by teaching them to use sign language such as Makaton or British Sign Language (BSL). The advantage of these is that people do not need to carry extra equipment with them so there's no risk of it breaking down or being lost.

On the down side, signing is only helpful when communicating with others who know the system. In effect, the child is dependent on a communication partner who knows them and their communication system. Also, if a child has a disability that affects their movements, they may find certain hand gestures needed for signing difficult.

Aided tools

Aided tools covers anything from low-tech methods such as picture symbols, talking mats, communication books and picture exchange cards (PECS) to Voice Communication Aids (VOCA). Simple VOCAs are machines that have paper overlays with symbols on them relating to a particular situation so, for example, a child may have a card for 'school' with various visual symbols on it).

Other VOCAs use screens with digital symbols so the child can flick through them. High-tech



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communication tools can be operated by touch, switches, a pointer or a joystick. The most sophisticated and expensive systems are operated by tracking eye movements.

A number of communication apps are also available online, which can be a cheaper option for children to use via a tablet.

Ask about

- **Amaze** – the **Special Educational Needs and Disability Information, Advice and Support Service (SENDIASS)** offers impartial, confidential advice on anything to do with special educational needs and disabilities for 0 to 25 year olds. Parents, carers, children and young people under 25 with SEND living in Brighton & Hove or East Sussex can use the service. Email sendiass@amazesussex.org.uk, call **01273 772289** or visit our website at <https://amazesussex.org.uk>
- **Brighton & Hove Inclusion Support Service (BHISS)** – a multi-disciplinary team that schools can call on to meet more significant needs around learning and communication and social, emotional and mental health. Speak to the SENCo at your child's school.
- **PECS** – Picture Exchange Communication System. Workshops and courses for parents and carers. Visit: www.pecs-unitedkingdom.com or call: **01273 609555**.
- **Speech and language therapy service** – works with 0 to 16 year olds with speech and language difficulties in various locations including children's centres, health clinics, special education and mainstream schools, hospitals, and pre-school settings. therapeutic services are provided via the **Seaside View Child Development Centre**. Ask a health or education professional to refer you to the service or contact them directly for more information on: **01273 242079**.

Further information and useful links

- **Ace Centre** – organisation providing information, training and support for both Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) and Assistive Technology (AT). See: www.acecentre.org.uk for more information or tel: **0800 080 3115**.
- **Communication Matters** – a UK organisation offering information and support for people with complex communication needs, as well as information on how to fund AAC. See: www.communicationmatters.org.uk or tel: **0113 343 1533** for details.
- **Do2Learn** – free printable resources, such as picture cards: www.do2learn.com.
- **Local Offer** – the local authority's online listing of all the services and support that are available to families with children with SEND in the area. Visit new.brighton-hove.gov.uk/special-educational-needs-and-disabilities
- **Makaton Charity** – information about Makaton signing. See: www.makaton.org or call their enquiries line on: **01276 606760**.
- **Mencap** – has further fact sheets and information on communication for people who have learning disabilities. Go to: www.mencap.org.uk or tel: **0808 808 1111**.
- **Speech Bubble** – a comprehensive database of communication tools and aids, run by the Ace centre (see above). Go to: <https://speechbubble.org.uk>





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- **Symbol World** – a website for symbol users that includes nursery rhymes, stories and a monthly magazine. Go to: www.symbolworld.org.
- **Talking Mats** – is a communication system that uses symbols and other images. Go to: www.talkingmats.com, call: **01786 479511** or email: info@talkingmats.com.
- **Visual symbols** – a variety of resources are commonly used, including 'Widgit', see: www.widgit.com. Your child's Speech and Language therapist may also have existing resources you can access. Some free resources are available at: www.visuals.autism.net.
- **Talking Point** – I CAN website full of information and advice on children's communication. Visit: www.talkingpoint.org.uk. call: **020 7843 2544** for advice or email: help@ican.org.uk.

