

TEACHING CORE VOCABULARY

FOREWORD BY KAREN GORMAN

AN OLD IDEA THAT DOESN'T WORK: There are significant obstacles and challenges when initiating Alternate Methods of Communication for those who have delays in their expressive language or are non-verbal. The antiquated notion of other people thinking for a person and pre-storing messages to be used later strips away the concept of individuality and is limiting to activity-specific exchanges.

ANOTHER OLD IDEA THAT DOESN'T WORK: The other common prohibitive practice when using Alternative Language methods for communication is to primarily use these voice-output devices to label nouns. This practice would best be described as *Vocabulary Development* and not as *Communication*. The strange thing about this practice is that the actual items (nouns) are generally right there in the environment, so rather than re-producing them in picture symbols, these items could be pointed to or gazed at by the communicator to identify them. Later, when communicative intent and related communication skills have developed, then teaching the relationship between the noun and the picture of the noun makes sense. Once someone is ready to expand the complexity of their messages, they would then work on developing language skills such as increasing their fund of vocabulary, learning the parts of speech, learning how words can be combined to create unique thoughts, etc.

By **TEACHING CORE VOCABULARY**, we are building the foundation for more complex communication and language skill development. We are able to provide a way for everyone to get in the game of communicating in all situations, not just prepared routines. By using **Core Words** to engage succinctly and frequently, we teach the students to “talk” or converse in a “give-and-take.” This type of conversation is engaging, motivating, and respectful. *It makes sense to provide those that are expressively challenged a quick way to respond in all scenarios. It makes sense to reduce the “demands of output” during active situations since they create an “unnatural waiting” and interruption of the conversation.*

AAC SHOULD NOT BE RESTRICTIVE: If the method for using Alternative Communication is restricted to activities, and all the exchanges are specific to the activity, then we are not exposing the students to natural language exchanges. In addition, we are inhibiting the way students think about language, since we are taking away the need for them to think about it by doing that for them.

WHAT IS CORE VOCABULARY?

Core vocabulary is a set of words that can be used in a variety of settings to communicate and respond quickly and effectively. This group of words is not set in stone but should have significant ability to be applied and used frequently. We have selected a group of words that we feel are effective. However, some may feel other words serve them better. Our set is called Give Me 20 which includes the following words:

Yes

No

I/Me

You

Good

Bad

Bathroom

Wow

Hi

Bye

Want

More

Need

Help

Here

There

My Turn

Do

Stop

Finished

Teaching a core group of words that can be used regardless of the activity increases exposure to natural language, enables the students to engage easily, provides information to the teacher regarding comprehension, and enables the desire to communicate more to emerge.

EXPOSURE to language, opportunity, and information is what all students deserve regardless of their ability to interact or respond to the information. It is disrespectful to assume things about the receptive abilities of students, and it makes no sense to have the same expectations for expression from those that have disabilities. The comfort level of the typical communicator needs to be more accepting to this succinct, limited output and accept this as important and valid.

THE CORE WORDS MUST BE TAUGHT

We created the GIVE ME 20 suggested core word list, which has become widely used and familiar to many of our schools. However, in order for the use of these boards to be successful each word added to a core board needs to be taught or they have no meaning or purpose.

Each word needs to be introduced to the students, practiced and applied prior to becoming effective and usable for them.

The suggested word list is just that, suggested. For example, we included the word WOW as there should be a way to exclaim or show emotion, but that word can be replaced with another word such as “Great,” “LOL,” etc.

If there are words that you feel have tremendous application in a wide variety of settings then feel free to incorporate them. We also are only suggesting a core vocabulary of 20 as a foundation. You may add another 20 words to this prior to shifting to combining words and expanding utterances. These are the decisions that will be dictated by the students you work with. In a classroom setting you may have some students that have only 4 symbols and others that have more and that is fine as long as everyone has a way into the conversation.

CHORAL RESPONSE is also an underutilized method of communicating. This provides peer support (a community of students working together), provides repetitive practice, and is efficient in a group setting. Too often the individual turn taking does nothing but interrupt the flow of the lesson. Educators should use choral responses with students, and each adult in the room should participate to provide a model for the students. Having adult participation also signifies a level of importance and respect.

IDEAS FOR TEACHING THE CORE are included here. These lessons are examples only. Feel free to develop your own. Be careful initially with exposure to concepts. Start out basic and then develop them to become more and more meaningful in different ways. For example the word or concept BAD, relates to behavior (as in good and bad, it is bad to hit someone), can mean not feeling well physically or emotionally (as in I feel bad, or it makes me feel bad when), it can mean destroyed or as in “the apple is bad” (no longer good to eat). We suggest you start out with the most basic reference which is probably related to behavior and this can be connected to class rules. This layering on of meaning for each word can be developed over time.

ORDER OF INTRODUCTION is also not necessarily defined specifically although some words make sense at the start of a new year with new students such as the concept of HI and BYE as a greeting, into coming and going, into start and finish etc.

The words YES and NO can be used in almost any exchange so getting these underway will get the group talking quickly.

SYMBOL REPRESENTATION is sometimes overly addressed. Exposure to and teaching a symbol representation trumps any idea that a particular symbol is better than another. Photo representation or any picture symbol set that is recognizable and can be referenced easily to what it represents is fine.

The key is exposure, teaching and setting up the connection between the item and the alternative representation. Companies that represent a symbol set will try to convince users that one is better than the other to sell a product. Consistent and established representation is important in the beginning. If you teach a symbol representation for an item, keep it constant until the student has a grasp of the concept. Once the student uses the symbol appropriately then it is time to expand and generalize the representation so the student can respond to other symbols that represent the same concept. This is typical development in language acquisition.

ACCESSIBILITY to using the core words may be a challenge for the physically impaired, eye gaze is a good place to start and manual eye gaze is accessible in any setting.

SEQUENCE OF INTRODUCTION: The order that these words should be taught is not set in stone. We suggest HI and BYE to be taught initially as these are so easy to introduce and apply to a new class of students.

Below is a suggested order:

Hi

Bye

Hi / Bye in tandem

Bathroom

Yes

No

Yes / No in tandem

Wow

Help

More

Finished

Stop

I / Me

You

Want

Good

Bad

Good / Bad in tandem

Need

Do

My Turn

Here

There

Here/There in tandem

FAMILY INVOLMENT is paramount for carryover and will provide you with an established rapport with parents from the start.

NOW IT'S TIME TO TEACH THAT CORE!

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