

Which words?

A short guide to choosing symbol vocabulary for your client's AAC system

Choosing the right words for any AAC system is a really important job. The aim is to enable the user to express whatever they want to the best of their language ability. That might include greetings, social niceties, jokes, requests, feelings, questions, everyday items and swear words! It's also important to include negations so the client can express when they DON'T like/want something. Choosing vocabulary is an ongoing process that changes with the user's changing communication needs. The most important thing to remember is:

"The vocabulary must reflect what [the user] wants to say, not what others want said"
(Dowden, 1999)

Below are some ideas about how to collect the right words for your AAC user. Be sure to gather information and words from everyone who knows the user well: family members, friends, carers, teachers, care home staff etc.

Make a list of all of their activities and environments throughout the day.	Keep a diary and record the user's attempted interactions e.g. Makaton signs, pointing, facial expressions.	Look at word lists from typically developing populations.
Make a list of words you think would be useful.	Ask the user what they want on the system by using a Talking Mat (contact Compass for more information).	Use the Social Networks approach to explore who their communication partners are.
Listen to what their peers are saying.	Think about what will meet their needs now AND later.	Make a list of everything they like. They will be more motivated to use the system if their favourite topics are on there.

(Morrow, Mirenda, Beukelman, and Yorkston, 1993)

Try to include a range of words – core and fringe. Core words make up roughly 80% of our speech and can be used in lots of different situations. Fringe words are less commonly used and refer to specific activities, things or people. Here are some examples:

Core: stop, next, different, good, move, on, up, slow, cold

Fringe: juice, cushion, window, park, Mum, TV, jumper, London