

## PECS and Speech Development: Does PECS inhibit speech development in children with autism?

When starting a child on a PECS program, one of the main concerns of many parents and educators is how PECS will affect the child's speech development. Many children are started on PECS when they are only two or three years old and it is not known if the child will become verbal. As PECS gives children an alternative way to communicate, the fear is that it will discourage the child from ever speaking. An important distinction, however, between PECS and other alternative means of communication is that PECS allows a non-verbal child to communicate while simultaneously reinforcing verbal speech. Instead of functioning as a speech alternative, PECS is more of a speech supplement.

Last year I worked for an ABA-based early intervention program for two- and three- year-olds with autism. I was a one-on-one aide for a non- verbal boy who had just begun using PECS to communicate. At the start of the program, he had no verbal language. We began by using PECS to request a few particularly beloved items -- crackers, cookies and juice. If my student requested a cracker, I would say "Here is your cracker, good job asking for a cracker" to verbally reinforce him and to build his receptive vocabulary. If he then requested another cracker, I would say "You want more, here is another cracker". After a few months, my student-who had been completely non-verbal up until this point-began to approximate the word "more" when he handed me the picture of an item that he wanted more of.

If you break down the process of speech development, many of the fundamental steps are reinforced by PECS. Labeling, in particular, is a main focus of both learning PECS and speech development. The cornerstone of many therapies used for children with autism is the breaking down of tasks into smaller concepts and mastering individual concepts before refocusing on the larger task at hand. In this way PECS provides a way to strengthen a child's ability to identify objects with pictures and words, building up the child's receptive vocabulary. Theoretically, once the child has mastered this skill of labeling, he or she will have more success in later phases of speech development.

Most of the justification for using PECS to foster speech development comes from the anecdotal observations of parents and teachers. While these personal experiences are extremely meaningful and have proven to be invaluable resources within the autism community, they are also subjective and lack scientific data. The few research studies done on PECS and speech development were done on a very small scale. Of the three studies I was able to access, none had more than three study participants.

A 2002 study following three children diagnosed with autism found that PECS did increase verbal speech (and also had a positive effect on behavior). Similarly, a 2004 study followed three children with autism spectrum disorders and developmental delays. These children also showed an increase in verbal speech. A 2004 study comparing PECS and sign language on acquisition followed two children with autism. Although this study introduced sign language training as well as PECS, both students did demonstrate increased verbal speech. As exciting as it is that these studies have shown a link between PECS and speech development, there is a clear need for a larger study.

### REFERENCES:

#### ARTICLES/HELPFUL WEBSITES:

"PECS and How It Works For Children With Autism." Autism Epicenter; The Central Point of All Things Autism.