

From Isolation to Communication

A case study about using PECS with an adult man with autism

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PECS is a system in which pictures are used in communication with other people and in which the person using PECS is taught to initiate communication. The method was developed by psychologist Andrew Bondy and speech therapist Lori Frost in 1985 in Delaware, U.S.A.

In the beginning PECS was developed to teach communication to young children with autism without functional speech, but during the years they have experienced that PECS is also useful to adolescents and adults with autism as well as persons with a severe lack of communication skills related to other handicaps.

The goal is to teach the person functional communication in a social context using pictures. The method consists of 6 phases. The first 4 phases teach the person to ask for tangible things and in the last 2 phases more social communicative skills are taught such as commenting.



During the last five years we have used PECS in our daily work as supervisors. This led to contact with a home for adults with autism. Headmistress Hanne Soerensen made contact because they had started a project in which they were introducing PECS to a man living there and she wanted us to supervise the staff.

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Case Study

Simon is 42 years old and has been living in this home for many years. Earlier his life was very turbulent and he had been exposed to many different homes and methods of treatment. At the age of 7 Simon was diagnosed with autism with low cognitive function. For the next 20 years he lived in 17 different places, foster homes and institutions. Prior to his present home he was placed in a Psychiatric Hospital for 3 years and most of the time locked up in belts because of challenging behaviour.

Simon was given quite a lot of medicine and he still needs some antipsychotic medicine to reduce his anxiety. After arriving at his present home the staff introduced him to the TEACCH method, with positive results. He now lives in a flat and is isolated and protected from other people. The staff have established a predictable and recognizable every day life for him. He carries out the same activities every day without deviation and his life is bound up with many routines and rituals.

The staff are uncertain whether there is anything he really likes except from carrying out his stereotypical actions such as rolling back and forth on his bed.

Simon is only able to cope with one person at a time and not at all with the other residents. If he is exposed to other people he becomes anxious, aggressive and starts to smash things. Due to this he is not able to attend workshops or other kinds of occupations during the daytime, not even at leisure times. Even though TEACCH has assisted him a lot he is still unable to cope with more than one person at a time and introducing new staff results in unrest and anxiety.

His mental age is estimated to be approximately 3 years old with the exception of motor control. He understands simple verbal explanations. He uses few words and a few 2-3 word sentences as well as some echolalia. Simon is not using his language communicatively and is not able to communicate his own needs and wishes other than using inappropriate and aggressive behaviour. He often displays threatening behaviour towards the staff, he seems chaotic and throws things around and even tries to hit the staff when frustrated.

Despite the great effort working with TEACCH the staff have not succeeded in making Simon more flexible and at this point he is not able to communicate. Therefore the staff decided to see if he could achieve these skills with the use of PECS.



The staff started to introduce PECS to Simon after a workshop held for all staff involved in this project. As Simon is only able to cope with one person at a time they decided, after thorough considerations, to deviate from the prescribed principles of two persons in teaching phase 1 and 2, a communicative partner and a physical assistant.

There was instant success in teaching Simon phases 1 and 2 in this way. They faced problems in phase 3 as they had introduced PECS using learning strategies taken from the TEACCH method. In TEACCH new skills are taught at a "learning table" and Simon had learnt that a red tablecloth meant "now I am going to learn something new". While he was learning how to discriminate between two pictures in phase 3, one of a preferred thing and one of a non-preferred thing, the red tablecloth for him meant: "now I am going to learn to eat something new". In this case the staff had chosen beetroot as the non-preferred thing, which he really dislikes. They had done this to make it easier for him to choose the preferred thing "marzipan", which is one of his favourites. Simon thought that he should learn something new, namely to eat beetroot. The introduction of PECS stopped as the staff didn't know how to solve this problem.

During the supervision of the staff we viewed videotapes and realised that the staff had run into the problem of trying to get TEACCH and PECS to work together.

The goal in PECS is to develop spontaneous communication in all every day situations. It is possible, but not without difficulty, to integrate this method with the TEACCH method. In TEACCH one of the major goals is to give people with autism a well arranged, recognizable and structured everyday.

From the video analysis we realised that they had made a serious and common error not having found strong reinforcers. They had made the mistake by simply taking photos of things they thought he liked and started PECS in that way. We decided to start all over again and remove the teaching of PECS from the "learning table". This also meant that we removed all visual clues that would remind Simon of TEACCH strategies. He got a new communication book in a different colour, so that all colour clues changed from red to blue.

The communication book was placed in his room. Over the course of 4 days he learned phase 1 and 2 in his everyday surroundings and the staff worked on generalising these skills to different situations and with different staff. He was quick to learn how to discriminate between several pictures in phase 3 and the staff's experience was that PECS was a success.

Simon is now merrily communicating what he wants at meal times and breaks and is clearly more relaxed and comfortable. All day long he has possibilities to communicate what he wants and he is carrying his communication book around his flat. His relations with the staff are now meaningful which gives him positive experiences due to communication. He is experiencing influence and he is now able to decide which kind of food he wants for his meals. Before PECS everything was chosen and arranged for him, because the staff didn't think he was able to make choices. The staff now experience him to be less rigid and fixed in his habits at meals and he is able to spontaneously choose new food items.

Generally he is calmer and less anxious and for a long time he hasn't displayed challenging or destructive behaviour.

Experiences

PECS has shown that Simon is able to communicate his own needs regarding what he wants to eat and communication training is now arranged to teach him to communicate needs in other activities during the day. He has become more flexible and less rigid due to his possibilities to communicate his needs with pictures.

Prior to PECS the staff's experience from working with Simon was strained, from their point of view he was unpredictable in his violent and aggressive reactions and some of the staff were frightened of him. Following the introduction of PECS we have heard the staff making statements such as "my relationship towards Simon has changed" and "when he is communicating I see him more as a real person". During supervision the staff told us that their scepticism towards PECS has changed and their attitude towards Simon has also changed and is now more positive. "Now we have quite different and positive expectations of him". New staff are now introduced without problems. Actually Simon is able to cope with two persons at a time when they are making video recordings.

During the past 6 months of supervision we have learned that PECS is a useful and beneficial method for adults with autism with low mental functions and challenging behaviour.

From our point of view Simon's life has changed. From a life full of frustrations, challenging and destructive behaviour to a life where he has influence and possibilities to communicate some of his needs.

Simon has reached phase 3 in PECS and now uses many pictures in his communication with the staff. PECS can be used without mastering all 6 phases, mastering of phase 3 means a lot of

possibilities for communication. From our point of view PECS has made a considerable change in the quality of Simon's life. As his violent behaviour has decreased the staff have acquired a more positive attitude towards him. This has opened up new and creative thoughts about the amount of challenges Simon will be able to cope with including in his social life.



References:

Lori A. Frost & Andrew Bondy: PECS – The Picture Exchange Communication System.