

CAREGIVER GUIDE TO SELECTING VOCABULARY FOR CHILDREN



WHY IS VOCABULARY SELECTION IMPORTANT?

- Augmented communicators who are not able to spell messages have to depend upon the vocabulary decisions of others to create a functional AAC system.
- Vocabulary has a tremendous impact on whether an AAC system is used or not. If the vocabulary on a board or device is not meaningful to your child or functional, he or she will most likely seldom use it.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT VOCABULARY SELECTION?

- “Vocabulary selection is a dynamic process that attempts to capture the changing experiences, interests, and knowledge of the person who uses an AAC system” (Beukelman, McGinnis, & Morrow, 1991, p. 171). In other words, vocabulary selection will be an ongoing process, not a one-time-only exercise.
- “...Those selecting vocabulary must have the user in mind at all times. The vocabulary must reflect what he or she wants to say, not what others want said” (Dowden, 1999).
- Because children of similar ages/developmental levels tend to use similar words, a relatively small list of words (i.e., “core vocabulary”) may meet many of the vocabulary needs of your child. Core vocabularies show a high degree of commonality across users (Balandin, Baker, & Hill, 1999). However, *core vocabulary will not meet all of your child’s needs*. A “supplemental” word list should also be provided for your child (Beukelman, McGinnis, & Morrow, 1991; Goossens’, Crain, & Elder, 1992; Fried-Oken & More, 1992). Goossens’, Crain & Elder (1992) define core vocabulary as a generic message pool (i.e., a pool of messages that addresses about 90% of the message needs for any given sub-activity) for a general activity to which supplemental vocabulary (i.e., vocabulary highly specific to the sub-activity) can be added. For example, there can be a core set of vocabulary for cooking, with changing “supplementals” depending on what is being prepared (e.g., brownies v. milkshakes).
- Although there is similarity between vocabulary children use at home and at school, around 25-30% of vocabulary may be context-specific (e.g., occur only at home or only at school) (Marvin, Beukelman, & Bilyeu, 1994). *This highlights the importance of including your child’s school team in the vocabulary selection process*.
- It is important to maintain a balance between programmed sentences and single words. Single words allow novel sentence construction and increase flexibility but are slower than sentences. Sentences speed up communication but decrease flexibility.

HOW DO I START SELECTING VOCABULARY FOR MY CHILD?

It is best to involve many informants (i.e., communication partners) in vocabulary selection including family members, peers, teachers and therapists. Whenever possible, try to include your child in vocabulary decisions as well. Vocabulary should be age-appropriate and peers are great sources of information regarding current slang, idiomatic expressions and profanity. Your child’s gender and culture should also be considered when selecting vocabulary. There are several tools included in this packet that will help you in this process. More than one strategy should be used.

WHAT TOOLS CAN I USE?

- *Environmental Inventory*- This involves making a list of the environments and activities relevant to your child and then compiling words and phrases that children typically use in those environments and activities.
- *Categorical Inventory*- This involves suggesting words that might be useful to the your child in a number of different categories such as people, places, feelings, etc.
- *Likes & Dislikes Checklist* – This involves identifying your child’s likes and dislikes so communication can focus on motivating and interesting things. It is important to incorporate vocabulary pertaining to activities/items that are both rewarding and important for your child.
- *Developmental Language Inventory*- Knowing the types and numbers of words that children typically use at developmental levels can allow us to make judgments about the vocabulary that might be appropriate for your child. Various research-based standardized vocabulary lists are available for you to check off and prioritize the words you feel would be important to your child. Consult your child’s speech-language pathologist for assistance with this. Alternately, lists can be found in several research articles and on the University of Nebraska – Lincoln Web site at <http://aac.unl.edu/vocabulary.html> .
- *Activity Based Pages* – These can be purchased as a software add-on for Boardmaker or in a book (e.g., Goossens’, Crain & Elder, 1994. Communication Displays for Engineered Preschool Environments. Solana Beach, CA: Mayer-Johnson Company.)
- *Core Vocabulary* - Several core vocabularies are commercially available for specific devices through the manufacturers (e.g., *Picture Word Power*, *Word Power* and *Gateway* for DynaVox devices, *Unity* and *Word Power* for Prentke Romich devices, *Word Power* for NovaChat devices).

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Fried-Oken & More, L. (1992). An initial vocabulary for nonspeaking preschool children based on developmental and environmental language sources. *Augmentative and Alternative Communication*, 8(March), 41-56.

Glennen, S.L., & DeCoste, D.C. (1997). Handbook of Augmentative and Alternative Communication. San Diego, CA: Singular Publishing Group, Inc.

Goossens’, Crain & Elder (1992). Engineering the Preschool Environment for Interactive Symbolic Communication. Birmingham, AL: Southeast Augmentative Communication Conference Publications.

Marvin, C. A., Beukelman, D. R., & Bilyeu, D. (1994). Vocabulary-use patterns in preschool children: Effects of context and time sampling. *Augmentative and Alternative Communication*, 10(4), 224-236.

Morrow, D., Miranda, P., Beukelman, D., & Yorkston, K. (1993). Vocabulary selection for augmentative communication systems: A comparison of three techniques. *ASHA*, 2(2), 19-30.

Yorkston, K. M., Dowden, P. A., Honsinger, M. J., Marriner, N., & Smith, K. (1988). A comparison of standard and user vocabulary lists. *Augmentative and Alternative Communication*, 4, 189-210.

Likes & Dislikes Checklist

Instructions: Please check the appropriate box under each activity or item. Make sure to list favorites where required.

Music:

likes dislikes unknown

Specify favorite songs, radio stations, instruments, etc. _____

Sports:

likes dislikes unknown

Please specify favorite sports, teams, etc. _____

Television & Movies:

likes dislikes unknown

Please specify favorite movie/program, characters, etc. _____

Animals & Pets:

likes dislikes unknown

Please specify favorite animals, name of family pet, etc. _____

Vehicles:

likes dislikes unknown

Please specify favorite vehicles, etc. _____

Foods/Tastes:

likes dislikes unknown

Please specify favorite food, flavors, etc. _____

Sights (e.g., lights, mirror, faces, etc.):

likes dislikes unknown

Sounds (e.g., environmental sounds, animal sounds, voices, musical toys):

likes dislikes unknown

Touch (e.g., fans, beans, massagers):

likes dislikes unknown

Movement (e.g., swinging, spinning, etc.):

likes dislikes unknown

Smell (e.g., perfume, peppermint, etc.):

likes dislikes unknown

Please specify favorite sensory activities, etc. _____
