

## CAREGIVER GUIDE TO CUSTOMIZING VOCABULARY FOR CHILDREN'S COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS



### WHY IS VOCABULARY SELECTION IMPORTANT?

- Children who are not able to spell messages must depend upon the vocabulary decisions of others to create a functional communication book, board, or speech-generating device.
- Appropriateness of vocabulary affects whether an AAC system will be used or not. If the vocabulary in a book or speech generating device is not meaningful or useful to your child, he or she may 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). If your child uses LAMP Words for Life, Unity, WordPower, Crescendo, Speak For Yourself, or Core First, your child is already using a vocabulary that is rich in core words. However, *core vocabulary will not meet all of your child’s needs.* Fringe vocabulary (i.e., vocabulary that is more specific to a topic, environment, or individual) should also be available to your child. Fringe vocabulary might include your child’s favorite foods, toys, TV shows, or names of family members.
- 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.
- NOTE: For individuals with severe speech impairments literacy is a key to self-expression. Only literacy provides unrestricted access to language. No symbol system, no matter how linguistically-based or how many thousands of vocabulary items it can represent, can compare to the alphabet. With only the 26 letters of the alphabet, any literate individual who is unable to speak can say anything, in any way he or she desires. Consider adding a keyboard or letterboard to the child’s system when appropriate.

### **HOW DO I START CUSTOMIZING 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 ARE INCLUDED?**

The tools in this packet are designed to help you think about the words that your child will need on his or her communication board, book or speech-generating device:

- *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 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 include such motivating and interesting things. It is important to incorporate vocabulary pertaining to activities/items that are both rewarding and important to your child.

### References

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## 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. \_\_\_\_\_

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### *Sports:*

likes       dislikes       unknown

Please specify favorite sports, teams, etc. \_\_\_\_\_

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### *Television & Movies:*

likes       dislikes       unknown

Please specify favorite movie/program, characters, etc. \_\_\_\_\_

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### *Animals & Pets:*

likes       dislikes       unknown

Please specify favorite animals, name of family pet, etc. \_\_\_\_\_

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### *Vehicles:*

likes       dislikes       unknown

Please specify favorite vehicles, etc. \_\_\_\_\_

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### *Foods/Tastes:*

likes       dislikes       unknown

Please specify favorite food, flavors, etc. \_\_\_\_\_

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### *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. \_\_\_\_\_

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