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SPEAKERS

Veronica

Welcome to the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast, the podcast for special educators who are looking for personal and professional development. I'm your host Dr. Christine Reeve. For more than 20 years, I've worn lots of hats in special education. But my real love is helping special educators like you. This podcast will give you tips and ways to implement research based practices in a practical way in your classroom, to make your job easier and more effective.

Welcome to the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast. I'm Chris Reeve, and I'm your host. You are listening to Episode 197, in which I am going to talk about the picture exchange communication system and 10 things that I like about it.

So if you've heard about PECS as a communication system, and I will clear up some myths and some difficulties in understanding what PECS is in this episode as well, I highly encourage this as a listener, I really do love the PECS system. I went to their training 20 years ago, it is still training that I go back to over and over. And as you can hear, I've got a little cold. So I'm going to try and make it through this episode, and keep my voice. So let's get started.

So let me clear up one of the misunderstandings about PECS to start. PECS stands for the picture exchange communication system. PECS is an acronym for that system of teaching students to communicate. Many, many times the acronym PECS, P-E-C-S has been taken and misused, just to talk about the use of pictures, sometimes the use of pictures and communication, sometimes the use of pictures in schedules and other visual supports.

But in reality, PECS is actually a very systematized approach to teaching students to communicate. And it is a system with specific phases, where students do start off physically exchanging a picture to request an item, then they move on later to commenting and describing and expanding the functions

of their communication. And that is something that I also think is really important. And I have an episode or a blog post on that, that I will make sure I put in the show notes, as well as to why it's so important that we look at expanding the functions of our students communication.

So I'm not going to tell you how to implement all of PECS. I do highly recommend it their training, and I will put their site in the show notes as well. It has a lot of really good listings of research and things like that that are helpful.

But the first reason that I really love the PECS system is because it is a teaching system. So it is a system that is designed to teach communication from the very basic level. It has six phases. They're very specific. They are based on the science of verbal behavior, and they are part of applied behavior analysis.

VB is devoted to all types of verbal behavior, texts, speech and communication. But PECS is designed based on the stages that were outlined in the verbal behavior approach.

But one of the things that's really great about it is it's a collaboration when they developed it between a behavior analyst and a speech pathologist. And those of you who've known me for a while you've heard me talk about Sue Cabot, who I have the awesome opportunity to work with very frequently, and is my writing partner. She's a speech pathologist, and I'm a behavior analyst. So obviously, I have a real soft spot in my heart for that collaboration. But I think they work so well together.

And so I think that when, obviously I believe in collaboration, so when we work together, I think it's so much better. And the PECS system is an opportunity to bring the best of both worlds to that.

There are very specific stages of instruction and very specific methods for teaching that initial exchange of a picture to get what they want, to teach students to discriminate between pictures, and contrary to popular belief, we do not have to worry about discrimination before we teach communication. We don't have to have kids be able to tell the difference between pictures in order to start some basic communication strategies.

It moves on to teaching them to travel to communicate, so that when their communicative partner is not right with them, they know to go to them. And then later it builds on those functions with commenting and describing and things like this.

And all throughout this we are modeling and encouraging speech. We are never thinking that pecs is going to necessarily be a replacement for spoken language. We are modeling the spoken language when we use PECS, and we are using strategies to encourage our students to use it as well.

The second thing I really like about it is that it makes the act of communication tangible. And Bates said way back in 1979, that signaling behavior in which the sender is aware of an apriority of the effect, so they know ahead of time, the effect that the signal will have on their behavior. And they persist in that behavior until the effect is either obtained, or failure is clearly indicated.

So what essentially she's saying is that communication is all about getting someone's attention, delivering a message, continuing to persist in delivering that message, or giving up because you've decided that you have failed to do that.

That is a piece of communication that students with autism in particular, really, really struggle with. There is so much more to communication than just naming something or having vocabulary. Individuals with autism have difficulty understanding how communication works, that I have to have your attention in order to communicate effectively.

And those developmental phases that if you have children of your own, you may have seen a two and three, those are phases that many of our students with ASD don't go through.

So the great thing about PECS to me, the number two great thing is that in order to deliver that message that they're trying to use in communication, they have to get the partner's attention in order to make that exchange.

Having to exchange a picture is a much more concrete act than saying something. Saying something may or may not end up in someone responding to me, because they may not know I'm talking to them, they may not know what I want to communicate. So this is set up so that they have a specific message they want to deliver. I want that popcorn, and they pick up at the beginning, it might even be a blank card, and they give it to the person who has the popcorn and that person gives them popcorn in return.

So they understand that I do something, and I get a response. And if they try once and give up when no one responds, then we work on persistence. But the act of giving the picture to someone means they can't just go on the other side of the room and talk and expect someone to respond. So the communication Act becomes tangible in that way.

The third thing I really love about the PECS system is that it focuses on initiation. One of the things that our students with ASD typically have is some difficulty initiating actions. It's not just communication, but communication is a big one of those actions. So that means that they might sit and wait for somebody to ask them, "What do you want," or hand them a picture, or an augmentative communication device.

And I don't know about you but when I'm sitting at the table, and I want more potatoes, I don't ask for someone to notice that I want something and ask me what I want, before I make my request. Instead, I get the attention of the person sitting near the potatoes and I asked him to pass them to me.

Similarly, I don't wait for somebody to hand over a communication device for me to tell them what I want. That communication device is available to me everywhere I go, it's sitting by my place at dinner. And if I'm using it, I'm using it to initiate a request.

So many, many times we teach things like that we don't even realize that when we're asking a question or showing them something that they want, and we hand them an aug comm device. We're letting them know that we control their speech, they don't control their speech. And that is most definitely not what we want.

So I want to make sure that our students understand they have to initiate that communication. And that they can do that, they have the tools to do that. And we need to teach them that from the start. And because of that, we want to make sure that we're not saying, "What do you want?" and PECS has specific protocols in place to work specifically on getting independence at initiating communication.

Number four is the PECS system can decrease challenging behavior. We know that there's a huge relationship between communicationand behavior. And we have research, significant amounts of research over the years, that shows that PECS to teach communication functions that serve the same needs as challenging behavior. Maybe that's getting an item or an activity that I like. Maybe that's getting your attention. Maybe that's getting out of something.

When we use the PECS system, then we can replace those behaviors, using functional communication training and PECS together to decrease challenging behavior. And I'll put some links to some functional communication training episodes as well.

The fifth thing I love about PECS is that it can encourage speech. A lot of families are hesitant to try it, because they are afraid that any type of augmentative communication is going to replace speech. We have no research that has found this to be true.

We do know that we can, we could certainly teach students to use nonverbal methods of communication, and not teach speech, in which case we're doing them a disservice. But the research on PECS and some other forms of AAC have shown that speech often increases over time as we use this. And in fact, I've had quite a few individuals who have used the PECS system, who as they became more proficient at using their speech, they discovered that was a more efficient way for them to communicate, and they kind of faded out the PECS system on their own. And we can help them with that, through our modeling and through the way that PECS is designed.

Number six, one of the reasons I really love using pictures and the picture exchange system is because the pictures are highly interpretable. Pictures are easy to understand. Sign language is not easy to understand, it's easy to understand if you know it. In fact, I was just reminded on the British Baking Show the other day that British Sign Language and American Sign Language are not the same, even though we both speak English. So it's kind of a foreign language at that point.

Sign Language and some individual's speech for our students can be difficult to interpret. Sometimes it's not used effectively. And that can lead to a lot of situations in which an individual isn't able to communicate effectively. Pictures are easy for everyone to understand. We put word labels on them, so that the adults know what it means. And the picture comes to have a meaning for the student. And that makes communication efficient and successful for both parties involved.

The seventh thing that I love about PECS is that it's expandable. Once a student is able to use one picture and make the exchange, the system moves to teaching them to travel to the book, and then travel to the partner. It also begins to expand the length of a student's communication using a sentence strip. And it works on increasing the functions of their communication later on working on describing items in the request or commenting on something that they see.

Number eight that I really love is that it builds on student's strengths. Pat Mirenda makes a point that individuals with autism, typically, but not always, are weaker in motor imitation, fine motor ability, and representative memory, holding something in their head. Often, they are stronger in visual discrimination and visual perceptual skills. They've noticed patterns, they can identify visual things quicker. That's why we use picture schedules with them.

Because PECS is a selection based strategy, instead of something that requires them to learn how to sign, which when they don't do it well, even those who know sign language don't understand it, it capitalizes on the student's strengths to teach to their weakness. So we're using their visual perceptual skills to address those weaker communication skills.

Number nine, one of the things I love about it is it's cheap. I use the PECS system often to engineer the classroom, even when all my students don't necessarily have augmentative communication devices. I am in no way advocating for the idea that we should give them the PECS system instead of a Voice Output Device. But oftentimes, voice output devices take time to assess for, to get in, to get programmed, and to teach. PECS is a good fallback for that individual who goes on to have an augmentative communication device that speaks and there's a lot of value to giving a voice to our students as well.

But because of the tangible nature of making that exchange, that's something that our aug comm voice output devices don't necessarily have in them.

But the great one of the really good things about PECS is that anybody can do it. You need a notebook, you need pictures, you kind of need laminate, and Velcro and you can make a PECS system. I would suggest you also need some training and maybe the manual, which I will list is in the show notes as well. But those are all things you have in your classroom already. So there's no excuse not to teach communication.

We shouldn't be waiting to teach our students communication until we get an assistive technology evaluation, or until a device comes in. We can do this and move on to that over time.

And finally, number 10 Is that the PECS system is an evidence based practice. PECS is one of those things that are identified as evidence based practices by the National Autism Center, by the what used to be the National Professional Development Center. And the research is really very clear.

And as I said, if you go to the PECS link that I will put in the show notes, or if you do Google PECS, you will find them. I think it's pecsusa.com, there is a section there where they have listed all of the articles that have evaluated the PECS system, in comparison to other things and on its own.And so I think that is a really strong testament to how we really need to think about making sure that our staff is trained in using this, and that they have the tools and the support to really make that happen.

Because there's no reason not to do it, because it's cheap. It's evidence based. It doesn't keep students from speaking. It builds on strengths. It's expandable to other functions. Everybody's going to understand it. It certainly encourages speech communication. It can decrease challenging behavior. It focuses on that really important initiation, which I talked about that that need to really make sure they're asking for what they want when they want it, not waiting for someone else to give them permission to communicate. We should never be waiting for a student to get permission in order to communicate. It makes the act of communication tangible. And it is a teaching system.

So I hope that gives you some ideas and that if you're not familiar with PECS, you'll go and check it out. Again, I think they're doing some of their training virtually now so it is more available than ever. I really think that their training has always been very, very strong. And I think it is a strategy, if you have students who are nonverbal or not functionally or verbal or minimally verbal, in your classroom the PECS system is definitely something to look at, in conjunction with the other things that you're working on at the same time.

Thank you so much for joining me. I will put a link to some communication boards that I have in my store that you can use to create pictures for the PECS system if that's something that you want. And I would love to hear your thoughts about this episode and all the episodes so if you would go to Apple podcasts and leave a review, I would be so so grateful because that helps us get the word out to more and more teachers to hopefully make their special ed life a little bit easier.

And I'll be back next week with a whole new episode. Until then, I'll talk to you soon.

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