

Myths and Misconceptions

You've heard about PECS, but do you really know what it is?

The Myths and Misconceptions surrounding the Picture Exchange Communication System™ (PECS)

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Over the past ten years or so, PECS has become an acronym that is well recognised in the field of autism intervention. While many people have heard of PECS, though, there are many myths and misconceptions about what the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) really is. Outlined below are some of the most common myths and misconceptions.

If we're using pictures of any kind, we're using PECS.

PECS does use pictures, but it is a specific protocol for teaching expressive use of pictures for an individual to communicate wants and needs, and to comment about the world. The protocol includes 6 distinct phases of teaching, as well as strategies for introducing attributes (e.g. colour and size) into the individual's language. It combines knowledge from the fields of applied behaviour analysis and speech-language pathology to produce an effective method for teaching functional communication. The teaching protocol was developed by Andy Bondy, Ph.D. and Lori Frost, M.S., CCC-SLP, in 1985 and is now described, in its most up-to-date version, in the Picture Exchange Communication System Training Manual - 2nd Edition (Frost & Bondy, 2002). This training manual is recognised by professionals in the fields of communication and behaviour analysis as an effective and practical guide to one of the most innovative systems available.

We're using a visual schedule, so we're using PECS.

PECS is an expressive communication system for individuals with severe communication impairments. Visual schedules are about receptive understanding. The Pyramid Approach to Education, of which PECS is a part, will make use of visual schedules, but they are not PECS per se.

PECS is only for people who don't speak at all.

PECS can provide a very effective functional communication system to individuals with no verbal communication, but it can also teach important skills to those who talk. The PECS protocol emphasises teaching a person to approach others to initiate a communicative interaction. Some people may speak, but don't understand the need for a social approach - they may talk to an empty room or to the fridge. These individuals may be able to learn about the social approach through PECS. Other people may speak, but will only do so if asked a question or told to use their words. These individuals may be able to learn how to spontaneously initiate communication through PECS. PECS can be an alternative communication system for those who don't speak or an augmentative communication system for those who do.

PECS is only for young children.

PECS has been used around the world with people aged from 14 months to 85 years. While the learning process may be different for people at different ages or with different types of communication impairments, PECS can be an effective functional communication system right across the age range.

PECS just teaches people to request.

Requesting is the first skill taught in PECS, but the protocol's final phase focuses on teaching commenting (e.g. I see, I hear, I smell). PECS is not about a person just getting his/her needs and desires met, but about communication with other people in his/her world.

If a person asks for something using PECS, we have to honour the request, and that will just produce a "spoilt brat".

The PECS protocol involves honouring every request only during Phases I and II. This is the time when the person learning PECS is developing his/her trust in the communication system, and communicative partners. If we start saying "No" too early, the person learning PECS may give up trying to communicate, because his/her experience is that it doesn't always work. Once the individual has mastered Phase II of PECS, we can be confident that s/he is a persistent communicator, and it then becomes appropriate to teach the concept that a person can always ask for what s/he wants, but the answer will sometimes be "No".

If we use PECS, the person using the system won't learn to speak.

As with any other alternative communication system, the use of PECS will increase the likelihood that a person will become a verbal communicator. Research has been carried out looking at the emergence of speech in PECS users, and the results indicate that speech may well be an outcome of PECS. What we also know, though, is that even if a person doesn't start to speak with PECS, that person will have an effective way to communicate with lots of different people in his/her world.

PECS is only for people with autism.

PECS was developed at the Delaware Autism Program in the United States and did therefore have its origins in the field of autism intervention. What has been discovered over the 20 plus years since its inception, though, is that PECS can serve as an effective communication system for a range of individuals with communication impairment. PECS is being used with individuals with autism, Down syndrome, Cri-du-Chat, Angelman's syndrome, developmental delay, language disorder, developmental verbal dyspraxia, head injury ... and the list goes on.

In summary...

The Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS, Frost & Bondy, 2002) is a unique augmentative/alternative communication training protocol that has received worldwide recognition for focusing on the initial component of communication. PECS does not require complex or expensive materials. It was created with educators, resident care providers and families in mind, and so is readily used in a variety of settings. The system has been successful with individuals who have a wide array of communication, cognitive and physical difficulties.

Training in the Picture Exchange Communication System is available through Pyramid Educational Consultants, a worldwide group of companies headed by Andy Bondy and Lori Frost. Our Pyramid Consultants work closely as a team with Dr. Bondy and Ms. Frost to maintain their expertise and to update any PECS protocol modifications that are made.