

COMMUNICATION TOOLS

This fact sheet has been written by parent carers for parent carers.



What are communication tools?

When a person has a communication difficulty, which may be because of a condition such as autism, cerebral palsy, a learning disability, or due to a brain injury or degenerative illness, they may need tools or alternative ways to communicate. This fact sheet will cover some of the communication tools available, as well as signposting you to places that can help you and give further information on your options so that you can choose the best options for your child or young person.

Who benefits from using communication tools?

We all know how important communication is. It allows us to interact with other people and to express our needs as well as our likes and dislikes. If a person has speech and language difficulties, finding other ways to help them communicate using whatever tools are best for them allows them to express their views. It ensures they have a say in everything from day-to-day choices to important decisions, wherever possible, which will have a positive impact on their self-esteem and mental health.

Types of communication tools

Finding the communication tools that are most suitable to your child will depend on their individual needs and abilities. Tools include: gestures and sign language, pictures, communication boards, tablets and speech-generating devices. Sometimes these tools are referred to as 'augmentative and alternative communication', or AAC for short.

Your child's Speech and Language therapist (SALT) will be able to advise you on which ones would be most helpful for your child. Communication tools can be divided into two categories:

Unaided tools

These are low-tech and do not use extra equipment. Instead, they rely on things such as a person's facial expressions, ability to gesture and make vocalisations and or by teaching them to use sign language such as Makaton or British Sign Language (BSL). The advantage of these is that people do not need to carry extra equipment with them and so there's no risk of it breaking down. On the down side, signing is only helpful when communicating with others who know the system. Also, if a child has a disability that affects their movements, they may find certain hand gestures needed for signing difficult. In effect, the child is dependent on a communication partner who knows them and their communication system.

Aided tools

Aided tools covers anything from low-tech methods such as picture symbols, talking mats, communication books and picture exchange cards (PECS), which are often used by children with autism. High-tech methods cover anything from devices that can be used to record a single message, to others that record a selection of messages, through to Voice Communication Aids (VOCAs). Simple VOCAs are machines that have paper overlays with symbols on them relating to a particular situation, so for example, a child may have a card for 'school' with various visual symbols on it).

Other VOCAs use screens with digital symbols so the child can flick through them. High-tech communication tools can be operated by touch, switches, a pointer or a joystick. The most sophisticated and expensive systems are operated by tracking eye movements.

A number of communication apps are also available online, which can be a cheaper option for children to use via a tablet.





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Ask About

- **ASCT (Autism, Social and Communication Team)** – team of advisory teachers with expertise in autism who support and advise schools on the educational, social and emotional development of children and young people. Referral is via your child's school – please ask them for further information.
- **ASPENS (previously Autism Sussex)** – go to <https://aspens.org.uk> or call: **0345 450 0060**. It runs behavioural advice services, parent workshops, coffee mornings, clubs and siblings clubs.
- **Child Disability Service** – a social work service for children and young people with severe and/or complex disabilities, it works with families and other agencies to ensure they get the right support. Information can be found via the local offer website: <https://westsussex.local-offer.org/services/265-child-disability-teams-lifelong-services-social-care> or families should call the Integrated Front Door (IFD) for West Sussex Children Services on **01403 229900** or complete the online referral: www.westsussex.gov.uk/Raiseaconcernaboutachild.
- **Early Bird** – three-month course for parents and carers of children under 5 with autism designed to help develop their child's communications skills and behaviour. Early Bird+ is available for school-age children. A referral is required via your local **Portage** team.
- **Portage** – a home-based educational programme tailored to a child's individual needs. Available to very young children. Chichester: **01243 536182**; Crawley and East Grinstead: **01293 572480**; Horsham: **01243 536182**; Mid-Sussex: **01444 243150**; Worthing: **01903 242558**.
- **West Sussex Children Services** – support from health and social care. If your child is under 18, call the Integrated Front Door (IFD) for West Sussex Children Services, tel: **01403 229888** or email: WSChildrenservices@westsussex.gov.uk. For over 18s call the **Adults' CarePoint**: **01243 642121**, or email: socialcare@westsussex.gov.uk.
- **Other resources** – the Ashdown club, Worthing: **01903 528607**; Kangaroos, Haywards Heath: **01444 459108**; PACSO, Chichester: **01243 533353**; Springboard Project, Horsham: **01403 218888**.

Further reading and useful links

- **Making Sense of it All** – our handy parent/carer guide contains information and advice on benefits, support for your child at school, getting help from social services and accessing social & leisure activities www.reachingfamilies.org.uk/guides.html.
- **Ace Centre** – organisation providing information, training and support for both Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) and Assistive Technology (AT). See: <https://acecentre.org.uk> for more information or tel: **0800 080 3115**.
- **Communication Matters** – a UK organisation offering information and support for people with complex communication needs, as well as information on how to fund AAC. See: www.communicationmatters.org.uk or tel: **0113 343 1533** for details.
- **Do2Learn** – free printable resources, such as picture cards: <https://do2learn.com>.
- **Makaton Charity** – information about Makaton signing. See www.makaton.org or call their enquiries line on: **01276 606 760**.
- **Mencap** – has further fact sheets and information on communication for people who have learning disabilities. Go to: www.mencap.org.uk or tel: **0808 808 1111**.
- **Speech Bubble** – a comprehensive database of communication tools and aids, run by the Ace centre (see above). Go to: <https://speechbubble.org.uk>.
- **Symbol World** – a website for symbol users that includes nursery rhymes, stories and a monthly magazine. Go to: <https://symbolworld.org>.
- **Talking Mats** – is a communication system that uses symbols and other images. Go to: www.talkingmats.com, call: **01786 479511** or email: info@talkingmats.com.
- **Visual symbols** – a variety of resources are commonly used, including 'Widgit', see: www.widgit.com. Your child's Speech and Language therapist may also have existing resources you can access. Some free resources are available at: www.autism.net/resources/visual-gallery.

