

# Communicating with Pictures and Symbols

*Allan Wilson*

Welcome to the Collected Papers from the 13<sup>th</sup> Augmentative Communication in Practice: Scotland Annual Study Day. The superstitious might have approached this day with some anxiety, but its success was clear two months before the Day when it became fully subscribed and the waiting list began to grow daily. Communication through the use of pictures and symbols is clearly an important topic.

This book offers the people who attended the Study Day a permanent record of the occasion, and an opportunity to learn from the presenters of workshops they were unable to attend. But it goes beyond that - it provides a detailed guide to the use of symbols and pictures to support people with communication difficulties throughout Scotland and beyond.

Alison MacDonald reviews the development of symbol systems in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and considers some of the problems that can arise in interpreting the meaning of some symbols. Deborah Jans and Kathy Sherrit take this theme further with a look at symbol selection, offering a "Symbol Ladder" as a tool to help decide on appropriate symbols and images to use.

Janet Scott provides a detailed account of good practice for designing communication displays, which should be compulsory reading for anybody new to the field - and for many current practitioners.

Good use is being made of symbols in schools across Scotland, as outlined in articles by Dithe Fisher and Pamela Cornwallis, Rosemary Stephenson and Christine Richardson, Jane Donnelly and Annie Kirkaldy, and Noreen Brown. Fisher and Cornwallis offer a range of techniques that can be used to introduce symbols, Donnelly and Kirkaldy stress the importance of training as a first step towards symbolising the environment, while Stephenson and Richardson emphasise the importance of support from management in implementing a whole school approach to the use of symbols. Many of the examples given could be adopted within adult environments with equal success.

Standard symbol systems are often not enough to enable effective communication, as outlined by Susan Gibb's consideration of sources of digital images and Lindsey Bowie's fascinating account of the use of drawing in communication.

Kim Hartley describes a project which used symbols to present health information to adults with learning difficulties. The costs and time involved in this work are important factors for consideration.

A number of important communication techniques using symbols have been pioneered in Scotland, including Talking Mats<sup>TM</sup>. Sally Boa and Joan Murphy describe some of their recent work in this area.

Sally Millar looks at ways in which symbols have been used in the vast amount of documentation now required when working with people with communication difficulties and the need for more work to be done in this area so that review processes can become more inclusive.

Finally, Tina Detheridge, a welcome guest from "South of the Border", describes some of the recent and forthcoming technologies that can be used to enable people with communication difficulties to use email and access the internet. As always, it is not simply a case of creating a new device, or new software - new symbol vocabularies need to be created and there are implications for all information providers.

Scotland has a high reputation in the world of Augmentative and Alternative Communication. Sometimes, it takes a Study Day, and accompanying book, such as this to remind us of the excellent work being done in many establishments across the country. At the same time, the Study Day reminds us of the need for good practice to spread across the country and for gaps in provision to be addressed.

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