

Pictures and Symbols: Planning, Consulting and Documenting

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Pictures and symbols are so important in supporting inclusion and the development of understanding, expressive language, interactive communication and literacy that use of these resources to create a visual environment should be the expected norm of good practice rather than a 'special case'. In other words, the issue is not "(When) should we use pictures and symbols?" but rather "How may we extend the use of pictures and symbols further, and develop even more effective use?"

This paper reviews some of the systems and processes (policy and practice) that will underpin successful picture/ symbol programmes.

As well as the games, stories, communication displays and books for the person to use directly, covered elsewhere in this book, we explore the idea that pictures and symbols might be included also in various other forms of documentation and record keeping to make these more accessible to the communication impaired person concerned and to involve the person more in developing choice and decision making skills and in making their views and preferences known.

Systems and Processes

As the 2003 Study Day and the papers in this book highlight, the use of pictures and symbols for communication is developing in all sorts of directions, with exciting and productive results. Abbott (2000) provides further diverse examples. Creativity, skill and enthusiasm in staff and families are a driving force, however the high level of communication support needs of children or adults using low tech augmentative communication of this sort should not be underestimated at the level of policy and funding of provision.

A successful and supportive environment for the use of pictures and symbols will include development initiatives at a number of levels,

some quite distant from the individual user. As suggested by Millar (2001), it may, ideally, include the following (although not all of these will be discussed in detail here):

- A communication policy within the establishment (and/ or organisation, authority);
- Strategic use of official/statutory documentation, e.g. School Development Plan, Staff Development Programme, IEP, Personal Care Plan, Person Centred Planning etc. with explicit and specific inclusion of picture and symbol use issues;
- Training for staff in AAC generally and picture & symbol use in particular;
- Effective collaborative interdisciplinary team-working;
- Appropriate assessment and provision procedures;
- Statutory funding for communication resources.

Policy

An important function of picture and symbol use is to provide users with continuity and consistency across all situations and settings. Achieving this does not come about by individual staff members working away in isolation. As Stephenson & Richards point out (p 30-33) a coherent strategy across the whole establishment is needed, with time allocated for collaboration and joint planning. The first step is an explicit commitment to meeting individuals' communication needs through a written policy on communication and use of augmentative communication methods. Cf. Chinner et al (2001).

Strategic Use of Documentation

In order to ensure that the specialised communication support needs of individuals are met, it is first necessary to identify these needs

explicitly in official educational or social work documentation (medical and therapy records, which are generally confidential anyway, will not carry executive power within local authority agencies). For example, details of implementation of a picture and symbol based communication programme should be in the Record of Needs, Individual Educational Programme, Care Plan, Community Care Assessment / Package etc. Other issues relating to documentation are discussed in more detail below.

Training

It will always be in the interests of the user for staff to develop and enhance their understanding of the process of using pictures and symbols. For example, we need to be clear that just 'pictorialising' or 'symbolising' everything is not in and of itself an automatic guarantee of success. We need to remember that some children and adults are developmentally unable to recognise and understand pictures. We need to be aware that people do not necessarily immediately understand symbols just by looking at them - symbols will need to be specifically taught and learned and practised.

We can marvel at all the wonderful resources that can be made with photos, pictures and symbols, but the next reaction of many busy members of staff is often "*but how can I make these things? I don't have the knowledge and skills (nor, often, the equipment) - and I don't have the time.*"

Many establishments have in the past tended to rely on Speech and Language Therapists or often S< Assistants, to provide appropriate symbol materials. This may work if the SLT Department is on-site or able to visit very frequently, but that level of provision is not always available. There can be a long time lag between identifying vocabulary needs and meeting them, so the effectiveness of symbol communication can be diluted or lost. In any case, responsibility for communication has to be a 'whole school' or 'whole establishment' commitment, and cannot be left to any one person. Ideally, all settings should try to have access to the hardware and software needed to produce at least some of their own photo, picture and symbol material, and staff should aim to acquire the necessary basic operational

skills. An in-house production system keeps visual materials up to date, personalised and relevant, and allows for change and variety, which should be motivating for users. Designated staff will require to attend training sessions both for general computer skills (e.g. the basics of how to use digital camera, picture editing, importing graphics into different applications etc.) and in the use of specific key software (e.g. *BoardMaker*, *Writing with Symbols* or *Clicker*)

Collaborative Interdisciplinary Team Working

Following on from the above, discussion and clarification of every team member's roles and responsibilities as regards a picture and symbol programme will be helpful, and it may be advisable to designate one person as the Communication Support Coordinator (see Millar 2001 for ideas about the remit of such a role in a school).

Funding for Communication Resources

Funding for additional staff resources (e.g. classroom assistant with specialist role or speech and language therapy assistant) may be imperative, as making picture and symbol resources for a number of users is extremely time-consuming. Teachers and therapists may request vocabulary and design resources, but may not have the time to physically produce these. Funding for specialist training is also an issue.

Obtaining policy commitment at senior level will also be needed to ensure funding for necessary equipment. Although low tech communication is *relatively* low cost as well, it is by no means 'no cost'. Use of digital photos and colour graphics (especially if video clips, sound files, voice output and switch access will also be involved) demands top of the range multimedia computer hardware - fast, with plenty of memory and hard disk space, and preferably direct access to the internet, using Windows 98 (preferably XP) or MacOS 9 or above operating systems. It is no longer acceptable (not that it ever was!) to 'palm off' special needs units with old computers when the rest of the school upgrades to new machines. Adults expected to use older 'business cast-off' machines may become frustrated, for example new digital cameras simply won't work with

old Windows operating systems. Ideally each group / room needs their own digital camera, sharing is not ideal. Files containing photos will very likely be too big to fit on to floppy disks so a CD writer or USB memory stick will be needed to allow for transfer of resources. Colour printers need to be fast and sturdy, and may need replacing at regular intervals (old printers use up more colour cartridges).

And let us not forget the 'hidden' costs of picture and symbol use - laminators, laminate, paper, booklets and folders etc., CDs and the big one - colour cartridges! Any establishment committed to a picture and symbol communication programme should think in terms of increasing its annual budget for colour printer cartridges tenfold; there is no way round it, it makes no sense at all to take all the 'big' steps towards implementing a symbol programme only to restrict the production of symbol materials.



Having appreciated how important the visual environment is for their family member, many parents and families are now starting to ask for symbol materials for use at home, to match those used at school or in the adult resource centre. Some may wish to produce their own materials on home computers and might need help with identifying, purchasing and learning to use appropriate software. It has been suggested that in a truly inclusive society, access to symbol software could be offered in the community, for example in the local public library computer. Another important step would be ICT support in the home, which is currently an area of unmet need. These are radical and potentially costly steps.

Sharing and exchanging symbol resources is a helpful way of keeping work time and costs down. There are increasing numbers of freely downloadable resources from the internet (CALL Centre, Widgeit, Do2Learn etc.)

A Continuum of Documentation and Resources

At one end of the continuum are formal educational and clinical records. In the past

these have been written by professionals for professionals (and in many cases have often excluded even parents). The new climate of encouragement for 'joined up working' is hopefully leading to more shared assessment and reporting and more open record keeping

Interdisciplinary team working should also help to outlaw jargon associated with any particular discipline. Since reports are now written on computer, it is easy also to include photos, if relevant, which could help to make reports more informative and accessible to all.

A Consultation Culture

Stemming from the Disability Rights movement, the growth of advocacy and self-advocacy programmes, and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, there is now widespread recognition at a human rights level that the views of people with disabilities and children should be sought, listened to and acted upon. Recent legislation and good practice guidance in Health, Education and Social Work underpins and supports this mindset; seeking consent from, consulting and involving people is now a key part of social policy in the UK. (*The Children (Scotland) Act 1995; Disability Discrimination Act 1995; Standards in Scotland's Schools etc. Act 2000;*) All children including those with complex communication difficulties should be consulted about matters that affect them (although there is evidence (Aitken & Millar, 2002) that children with complex communication support needs are currently not much consulted and that further awareness raising and development of special communication techniques are urgently needed).

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 is now fully in place, implemented in schools through *the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001* and the *Education (Disability Strategies) (Scotland) Act 2002*. All local authorities have been required to produce an 'Accessibility Strategy' to improve access to the environment and curriculum for, and ***to improve communication with***, (my italics) disabled pupils and all schools are required to put this into practice, in order to uphold the DDA. With adults, "You must take account of the adult's present and past wishes and feelings (and you must try every possible means of

communicating with the adult to find out what these are); you must encourage the adult to use any skills he or she has.” (Official guidance on compliance with *The Adults with Incapacity (Scotland) Act 2000*).

“People are increasingly being supported to make their own decisions rather than having others make decisions for them. Personal choice and control nowadays lie at the core of services and opportunities.”
(Aitken & Millar, 2002, Book 1, p3)

Being able to give consent meaningfully, and to exercise choice and control presupposes access to relevant information, which is where use of pictures and symbols comes in as one of the principle strategies available to support communication with people who have difficulties with oral and written language (although of course, not everybody can use pictures and symbols).

Record of Needs (& Coordinated Support Plan)

The Record of Needs document has legal status in that a local authority has a statutory duty to make educational provision to meet the special educational needs of a pupil, as recorded. Pictures and symbols are not included nor do they seem appropriate in this context. However, when the new *Additional Support for Learning (Scotland) Act 2003* comes into force, the Record is due to be replaced in the future by the **Coordinated Support Plan**. There are as yet no concrete examples of what a Coordinated Support Plan might look like, and much debate about how exactly such a plan will be coordinated and put into practice. It is likely that efforts will be made to further implement *For Scotland's Children (2001)*, in more closely linking formal education and healthcare. This is a good time and a good opportunity for therapists, teachers and other professionals to work together to ensure that access to information and resources to support communication with pictures and symbols are ‘built-in’ to the early prototypes!

IEP

Also required in law by the Scottish Executive, the Individualised Education Programme (or Plan) IEP is *supposed* to include input from parents and if possible the child him or herself,

although there are still many schools where meaningful consultation does not happen. The IEP includes a set of long term and short term SMART targets (i.e. specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, time-able).

It is important that the child him/herself has some concept of the existence of the IEP and what it contains (as it is what they are working towards and trying to attain), if possible. Children have the right to attend review meetings of their Records of Needs and IEPs and increasing numbers do. This is one forum in which the language of IEPs could be simplified if necessary, and pictures and symbols used as one part of the process of making the IEP more relevant and meaningful to the child. For the moment, it is the children that are taking the initiative: already there have been exciting instances where children have attended review meetings and instead of just sitting drooping while professionals talked ‘over’ them, they have presented to the meeting using a switch, a computer and/or voice output communication aid.

Personal Learning Plans

All children are supposed to have Personal Learning Plans again with input from the child and family (*Targeting Excellence, 1999*) although these currently seem to be thin on the ground amongst pupils with additional support needs. The focus of these is to help pupils to evaluate progress and prioritise efforts and targets. Using symbols would be an ideal methodology to facilitate this, perhaps in the context of Talking Mats.

Further along the continuum of resources, there are resources whose primary purpose is to provide listeners and potential communication partners with both background and day-to-day information *about* the person.

AAC Log

This is a way of documenting (Murray & Cooper, 2002) all the various augmentative communication approaches that have been tried with an individual over a period of time (including also information about what happened, whether it worked well or not and if not why not, etc.) The aim is to keep information openly available to interdisciplinary teams (rather than buried in SLT

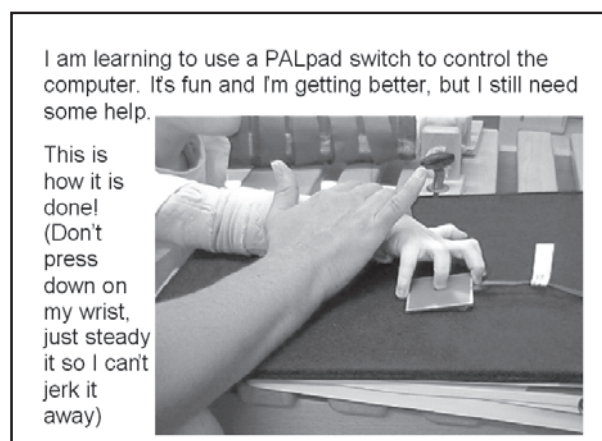
Details of System (& dates tried / trialled)	Appropriate	Not Appropriate	Skills Gap / Steps needed	Decision
Behaviour, speech, unaided AAC				
Low Tech AAC				
Simple Tech AAC				
High Tech AAC				
Computer use (for communication or skills development)				

notes) and across staff changes in order to learn from the past and avoid each new generation of therapists reinventing the same wheel. The headings above are a very short simple version of such a log. Copies of picture or symbol resources used, if a relevant, and also, most importantly, by photos of AAC tried, would ideally accompany the log. If this were done, then the log would be accessible not only to staff but also to the person him/herself, to provide an awareness of the process of communication development. It might also act as a conversation prompt to allow consultation and discussion with the user about systems he/she liked, didn't like, would like to try again etc. thus involving him or her more in decision-making about his/her own AAC systems.

Passports

Personal Communication Passports (for both children and adults) are a practical and person-centred way of supporting children, young people and adults who cannot easily speak for themselves. A Passport pulls together complex information about the person, and presents it in an easy to follow format. Passports do not have legal status although their existence is now recommended in guidance documents from the Scottish Executive (Millar, 2003). The degree to which information in a Passport is formally 'symbolised' as such will depend on the person's level of social awareness, cognitive and communication function. However all Passports, whether or not their owner has been

able to be involved in making them, will include photos and other graphic materials including, very likely, symbols (and/or clip art etc.). This serves to: personalise the Passport and stimulate a sense of ownership; make the information inside as accessible as possible to the Passport holder; show key information in specific detail (see illustration) where written description alone is inadequate; make the Passport attractive and easily readable.



Home-School diaries, logs

Home school diaries are also recommended good practice, and most adult placements (day and residential) also practice a similar 'log' system to pass important day to day information between home and school / centre or amongst staff going off and coming on shift, and to provide continuity. It also provides written evidence of communication that has occurred. The diary is often a hastily scribbled note

passing between teacher and Mum, or staff member A and staff member B. The downsides of this approach are a) such diaries provide ALL of the information, thus making conversational interaction unnecessary between the person with communication difficulties and their carers, and b) such diaries are generally inaccessible to the person with communication difficulties so not only do they have no input to the process, i.e. choosing what goes in and what doesn't, and how it is written, but also they are unable to review afterwards what others have written about them and how their day to day activities and behaviour were represented in writing. For some people, this is disempowering.

Madeleine, a non-reading) symbol user, lives in her own flat with 24-hour support. This works well overall but Madeleine, who very much wants to be in control of her own life, suffers continuous low level stress caused by day to day uncertainty about what information has been passed on to staff and what information has not been passed on (i.e. who knows what, or not). She finds herself reduced to repeating the same information again and again to everybody with whom she comes into contact, rather desperately, as a method of ensuring that somebody at least gets (and hopefully passes on) the message. This is unnatural and unsatisfying communication behaviour. A better strategy was devised whereby Madeleine indicated a key symbol that she felt summarised the information item in question, and a staff member then copied / drew this symbol into the log in her sight, to prove the item had been entered in the log. A written summary of the relevant information was added and then a set of empty boxes provided. Each person who read the information then stuck their photo in a box alongside the key symbol (small digital photos printed out on to Avery sticky label sheets). A little work to set it up and occasional hiccups in practice but basically - symbol user involved, information made accessible, source of stress removed - Result!

Similarly, in schools, pupils can be more involved in recording their own daily news by marking what they've been doing on a symbol 'checklist diary sheet' (also mentioned by other

contributors to this book) in place of the scribbled notes.

Practicalities

We have to acknowledge that a major barrier to producing illustrated or symbolised diaries is - as usual - lack of time. Extra time cannot be magically produced at the end of a busy day, to allow for more elaborate diary production. To speed up photo / symbol diary production the following techniques are recommended

Diary as part of the day's activities, not an afterthought

Instead of leaving it to a mad scramble at the end of the day, creation of the diary could be made a language and communication activity in its own right throughout the day, involving the person and perhaps photos taken as events unroll. During or just after each activity, while it is still 'live' in the person's memory, the person could be asked whether or not they wish to put a note of it in their diary for Mum (or whoever) to read about. If yes, they then choose relevant photos, pictures and/or symbols to represent this news item.

Symbol Processors

As many others have pointed out, use of *Writing with Symbols* software greatly facilitates the production of symbol materials. Not everybody is aware that *Clicker 4* (more commonly found in Scottish schools) can also be used to write documents in symbols if set up to do so (i.e. PCS or Makaton symbols linked in, User Preferences set to 'instant symbols as you type')

Conversation Resources

Further along the continuum, we shift slightly away from information resources into the area of resources which both provide some element of background information, and also provide a shared context for conversation (some of which may be in text, but also including photos, pictures and symbols) so that the person with communication difficulties can also access it and use it as part of interaction with a communication partner.

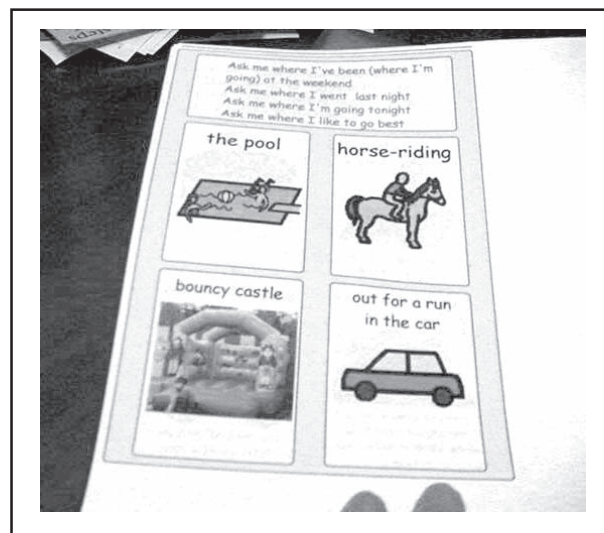


A full-scale symbol diary is one example of this. Another example might be a scrapbook or 'Clue Book' (in which the helper attaches objects of significance, such as a pressed McDonalds meal box, shop receipt, car key-ring or a cinema ticket etc., plus a little 'script' to set up an appropriate conversation path (instead of providing ALL of the information, thus making conversational interaction unnecessary).



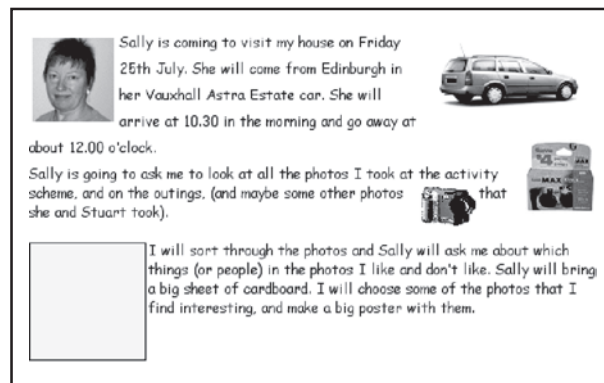
A 'Symbol Conversation Book' can suggest the exact questions the communication partner might ask, in order to facilitate the book user to answer appropriately

- "Ask me where I went (where I'm going) at the weekend.
- "Ask me where I went last night
- "Ask me where I'm going tonight
- "Ask me where I like to go best"



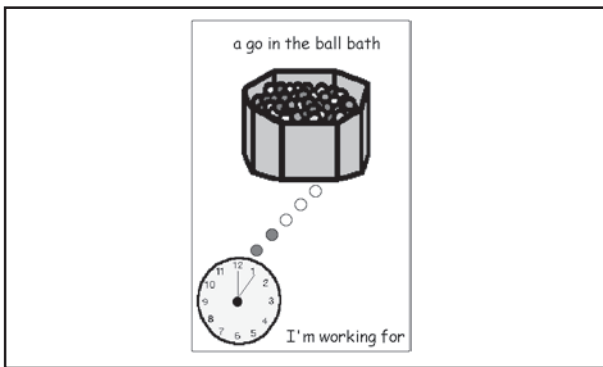
Social Stories

Social stories are now very widely used to help people with autistic spectrum disorders cope with new or difficult situations. Use of photos in particular is very important here, to keep things very specific and concrete.



Behaviour Management Strategies and Resources

Particularly in work with people with autistic spectrum disorders, presentation of information through a permanent visual medium is shown to be much more effective than through a transient, verbal route. This principle applies to behaviour areas as much as in education, language and communication. If a child is being encouraged to stay on task and/or to 'Wait' for a reward/activity, we might use a picture strategy to a) remind him of what the desired reward is (thus reinforcing his desire for it) and b) show him/her how long the wait is and how quickly time is passing. A 'unit of time' sticker or symbol can be added at intervals to represent gradually approaching the goal. Or parts of a picture of the desired toy or activity, e.g. computer, can be added at



intervals like a jigsaw, until the picture is complete.

Another technique commonly found successful is the 'Rule Card', available for the carrier to consult to remind him/herself of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. These are often written in text, but can also be produced in symbols for non-readers.

Towards the other end of the continuum are picture and symbol resources intended to be used more independently for day-to-day interactive communication. This book gives many examples of different ways of designing and using communication displays, so that will not be covered here, apart from mention of one particular aspect.

Communication Partners.

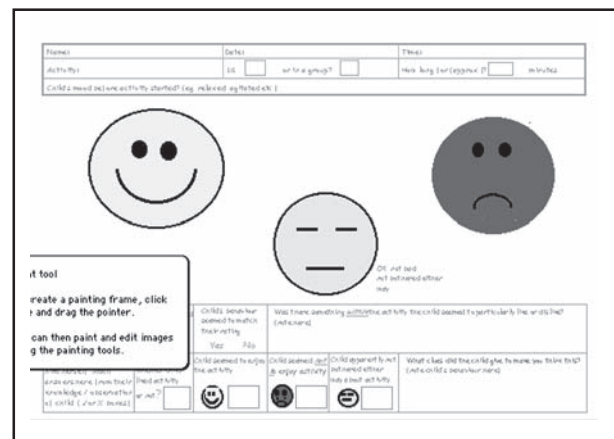
Janet Scott has provided a comprehensive set of ideas for vocabulary selection and organisation of communication displays /books in Chapter 4 of this book. How can we involve the user and communication partners in the process?

One of the easiest ways to launch vocabulary collection, once the basic structure has been designed and some core vocabulary identified, is to circulate an ordinary exercise book with vocabulary page headings on it, leaving people to fill in the specific words and phrases that they feel are important to the person who uses symbols, in various contexts. Depending on the age and developmental stage of the user, they will be as involved as possible in this process. This will ensure firstly that vocabulary is relevant and motivating, and secondly that the user, family and team members feel involved and valued and have a sense of ownership, making them more likely to use the book constructively. Similar mechanisms will be put in place to keep vocabulary updated.

Low tech communication always involves a degree of co-construction of messages between symbol user and listener. However the communication book is organised, it should include explicit guidance for communication partners and helpers about what to do (and what not to do) to help the user communicate clearly, what they should expect the user to do, and ideas for when and how to use the book. This will include clear instructions about how the partner is expected to 'model' book use by pointing to symbols themselves as they chat with the user. This is so important that it should not be 'skipped'. Latham (2003) devotes around 2 pages of notes per section within the communication book to orientate partners and to ensure that they know how to use the book properly. This information may also be elsewhere (e.g. in a Passport) but definitely needs to be 'on the spot' when and where communication is taking place.

Recording Users' Views and Preferences

Outside of fixed communication displays, pictures and symbols can be used 'dynamically' in consultation situations (on both small and large matters) to help people with communication difficulties to indicate their views and preferences. Use of Talking Mats is discussed elsewhere in this book. In a recent project commissioned by Dumfries & Galloway, to firstly identify the preferences and views of youngsters with complex communication difficulties and secondly, take these into account when planning and implementing new services, a number of other sorting and rating procedures outlined in Aitken and Millar 2002/ 2004 were put into practice. For example 'Smiley face / sad face recording'



For the children who could use simple symbols A4 sheets on card paper were printed. Each sheet had a 'smiley face' (like) and 'sad face' (don't like) symbols (and a mid position 'it's OK, not bothered' symbol, which was not always used) together with instructions for staff. Each child was invited to show what he/she thought of an activity or event by indicating 'I like' or 'I don't like' in answer to prompts about the activities. Some children could mark or colour with a felt tip, others pointed our eye pointed. The sheet was completed on the site of the activity during or immediately at the close of every activity. More children managed to do this effectively than we had anticipated. We also found that if we refined our questions and asked the children to point out their response to various different parts or aspects of the same activity on one sheet, it worked better than a 'global' question and we got far more useful information.

In the same project, we also used stickers and guided drawing techniques to elicit preferences and clues about how the children were feeling about the activities and the people they were with. Some children were issued with disposable cameras and themselves took photos to highlight their interests and preoccupations. Through these, and similar, means we obtained useful information without requiring the children to use any formal symbol system.

Photos taken of (and by) the children throughout the activities were collected and children chose the photos they wanted to make an individual diary/album or poster as a record of the project. Making the diary acted as a conversation prompt, for further eliciting of reactions to the activities. Use of the diaries at home shared information with parents and families, and the plan is to use the diary next year as a means of reminding the children and preparing them for the next, forthcoming project.

Permission to Use Photos

One of the implications of using graphic material that includes photos ever more widely is that permission to use photos of individuals may need to be obtained to cover not just one specific instance but also a much wider and range of circumstances. CALL is piloting a new type of permission form for parents and family

to sign. This explains the background principles (i.e. that use of photos, pictures and symbols help the child to access information and to communicate and would also help parents to communicate with him/her and to find out what he or she had been doing). The form enables families to give permission:

- For photos and/or video to be taken of the individual;
- For the individual to be included in the background of photos or video taken of other children or groups / activities;
- For individuals' photo or video clip to be used in resources aimed to improve the quality of information available to other children, families, and staff (for example, Personal Passport, PowerPoint slideshow, video, in a diary, poster;
- For these to be used in various ways (e.g. stuck on activity scheme wall, projected on the wall as part of a presentation, included in exhibition or community newsletter etc.) that might mean that they are seen not only by staff but also by volunteers, other parents, members of community groups etc.;
- (If applicable) to take photos (i.e. with a disposable or digital camera) him or herself and have these developed by staff.

Conclusion

There are many different types of picture and symbol communication resources, to meet different needs. In an ideal environment, where access to such resources is made possible, people with communication difficulties can use not just one, but as many of the above mentioned resources as they find helpful. Pound & Hewitt (2003), talking about adults with aphasia, refer to such these resources as 'communication ramps' (i.e. to provide access to social conversation) and show videos of people sitting with their listeners at tables covered with several different albums, diaries, scrapbooks, and so on, which may all be drawn in at some point in the conversation to fill an information gap, prevent or untangle

misunderstandings, or illustrate a point.

Supporting people who use pictures and symbols for communication and learning, consulting them for their views is an exciting and rewarding challenge. A successful outcome will rely not only on the creativity and enthusiasm of 'front-line' staff but also on policy makers and senior management, who are in the position to enable the necessary 'backup' for teachers and therapists, in the form of planning,

training, funding, and time allocation for joint collaborative planning and working.

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CALL Centre website (Passports Section & Resources & downloadable *BoardMaker* topic charts, *Clicker* grids, *PowerPoint* resources) www.callcentrescotland.org.uk.

Chinner, S., Hazell, G., Skinner, P., Thomas, P., Williams, G. (2001) *Developing Augmentative Communication Policies in Schools* downloadable from www.ace-centre.org.uk/html/publications/.

Do To Learn website, with many downloadable pictorial and symbol resources especially suited to autistic spectrum disorder www.do2learn.com.

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Scottish Executive legislation and reports downloadable from www.scotland.gov.uk/publications/subjects.aspx.

Widgit Software (*Writing with Symbols 2000*, ideas and resources, link to Symbol World site) www.widgit.com.