

The Picture Exchange Communication System

Preparatory Phase: Reinforcement Assessment

In this stage, the teacher identifies and selects reinforcing items that they will use during the subsequent phases. Formal examples of reinforcement assessments and forms can be provided.

Phase 1: Teaching the Physically Assisted Exchange

The trainer has arranged the environment of the learner to have reinforcers within reach. As the student reaches for a reinforcer, the trainer places a picture of the reinforcer in the child's hand. Upon handing the picture (with assistant, though decreasing over time) to the trainer, the child receives the item depicted with verbal praise (and labelling the item for the learner) as though they naturally asked for the item.

Phase 2: Expanding Spontaneity

The trainer gradually increases the distance the learner has to travel to retrieve and give the picture. First the trainer moves further and further away, then the picture is moved to greater distances. In this step, other reinforcers are introduced and the environment is varied to increase generalization. Also, the trainer should slowly eliminate cues that the student is exhibiting the desired behavior to teach (and reinforce) the student gaining the person's attention.

Phase 3: Simultaneous Discrimination in Pictures

The trainer now expands the field of pictures on the board to 2 or more. Starting with a neutral 'distracting' picture, the student is only reinforced when handing the correct, corresponding picture. The amount of distractors is slowly increased. If the student continually struggles to discriminate, several different strategies can be attempted. After they are using 12-20 pictures, they can move to Phase 4.

Phase 4: Building Sentence Structure

Via backward chaining, the learner is taught to place "I want" + "desired item" together on the sentence strip. Training continues until all words are used with the sentence construction.

Phase 5: Responding to "What do you want?"

As opposed to the child independently requesting, now they are prompted by the teacher asking "What do you want?" while pointing at the "I want" picture. As the child becomes successful, there is a delay (increased over time) between pointing and asking until the learner completes it with no prompts.

Phase 6: Commenting in Response to a Question

To generalize to responding to questions, the student is prompted through responding to the question "what do you see?" when shown a moderately-preferred item, responding with the sentence "I see" + "picture of item." To teach discrimination, this is eventually run in conjunction with "What do you want?".

Beyond Phase 6: Introducing Additional Language Concepts

Once students have 30-50 items they are requesting and answering "What do you see?" with, they are taught to request using adjectives and answer different categories of questions.