

## Module: Picture Exchange Communication Systems (PECS)

### CASE STUDY EXAMPLE

#### Molly

Molly is a two-year-old girl with ASD who receives early intervention services in her home. Molly's parents and her EI service provider have been discussing Molly's language delays. Her parents are concerned that she doesn't initiate any communication, and notice that she is becoming increasingly frustrated at home when her needs are not understood. Molly's mom is able to tell what Molly wants by closely observing her non-verbal cues such as gazing at the snack cupboard or refrigerator when she is hungry. Her father and siblings often miss her cues. When her mom is not around, Molly frequently has tantrums where she will scream and cry. The team decides that Molly needs a way to let her family and friends know her wants and needs. Molly is not using any words. She uses some eye gaze, and will grab at preferred items within her reach, but mostly relies on her mother to anticipate her needs. Molly's EI team decides to set up PECS as a way to teach her some consistent communication skills to get her needs met. The team agrees that a communication system that is more universally understood will also better prepare her for the neighborhood preschool her family wants her to attend when she turns three. The EI service provider already knows that PECS is commonly used in this pre-school setting, and feels confident that PECS will be well supported when she transitions there in the fall.

#### ***Reinforcer Sampling***

The team, including EI service providers, parents, and siblings, sits down to brainstorm a list of some of Molly's favorite activities and edibles. They add some new items that they think Molly might enjoy. During the following home visit, Molly's speech language pathologist on the team follows the reinforcer sampling protocol for PECS by presenting items, two at a time, being sure to switch between left and right presentation across trials. Molly's mom watches the sampling and takes notes on which items are selected most frequently. After the session is complete, her mother continues to sample reinforcers throughout the week and document the items on a list of preferred/non-preferred/ and neutral chart. After repeating this process several days, the SLP and Molly's family feel that they have identified many highly desired items to begin PECS training.

#### ***Pre-Training Tasks***

The team gets the home prepared for PECS training by taking digital pictures of the items identified as highly motivating from the reinforcer sampling. They print out several copies of each of the pictures on the home computer and save a file of pictures on an external drive in case they need to replace one. The team organizes the pictures in a communication book. Each page of the communication book is sorted into categories

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like; bath items, fridge foods, snack drawer, toy box, etc. This way, the entire page can be removed and transported to the location where the items are in the home to encourage more opportunities for exchanges once the team moves to a relaxed training environment. The team closely reviews the PECS procedures so that EI providers and parents can perform the phase to fidelity. The team then identifies service times as well as times throughout the family's day during which PECS trials can be implemented. The team agrees to set up place at the kitchen table where the family can do PECS trials during quiet times in the family routine.

#### *PECS Phase 1*

Molly and her EI team practice the phase 1 exchange during her weekly scheduled times with the SLP with her mom acting as the helper. Her parents also create additional practice time during a morning snack when both parents are available and at bath time where Molly is given the opportunity to request bath toys. Molly learns to hand the picture to her mom, her dad, or her therapist. At first, Molly tantrums when her mom does not respond immediately to her eye gaze. Her communication helper consistently needs to support her to take the picture and hand it to the communication partner. In time, Molly becomes used to the picture exchange. She no longer needs prompts and independently picks up pictures to request items. The family and her EI team agree that they can move to the relaxed training environment. They create laminated request boards for areas of the house where Molly might want to ask for things. They put pictures next to the fridge and the pantry, in her toy closet, and in the bathroom. Molly continues to make exchanges. Every so often, she needs a helper to remind her to initiate an exchange when she is tired. Her parents help Molly's brothers and sisters to participate by being communication partners and helpers as needed. Molly's brothers and sisters are happy to see that she is crying and screaming less, and able to ask them for what she wants. Molly's family creates opportunities to exchange on shopping trips and out in the community by remembering to bring the PECS book with them on outings. They even teach Molly's grandma to exchange with Molly when Grandma spends time with the kids at her house.

#### *PECS Phase 2*

Molly's team feels confident that Molly has learned the physically assisted exchange in Phase 1. They have had success fading the physical assist and open-hand prompt. Molly is using the exchange in a more relaxed training environment around the house and out in the community. Mom and Dad are committed to implementing PECS and the whole family is happy that Molly's tantrums are much less frequent. In order to begin Phase 2, Molly's team plans to move the communication book with all of her pictures to a set place in each room of the house. Molly will have to first learn to remove the picture from the book and then travel to the communication partner and place it in their

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hand. When she is enticed by a reinforcer close to the book, Molly is able to take the picture off the book and hand it to the communication partner. During the training trials when the SLP comes to work with the family, they practice having the communication partner move further and further away so that Molly will have to walk over to that person to give him/her the picture. Molly begins to tantrum again and needs support from the helper to carry the picture to the communication partner and place it in their hand. The team works hard to shape Molly's behavior. They want to make sure that she continues to try and communicate without getting too frustrated. By the time fall arrives, Molly is consistently removing pictures from her book and placing them in the communication partner's hand. She has successfully made phase 2 exchanges in many rooms in the house. At enrollment time, the team is able to sit down with the preschool and share Molly's PECS progress with her new teachers. The EI team has made a PECS book for the school setting and has printed out the reinforcer assessment that they have compiled and updated. Molly's parents share with her school team that they want Molly to continue working on PECS. The pre-school assures the family that several members of the team are PECS trained and familiar with phase 2 protocols. The two teams agree to continue working on PECS and to meet monthly to share progress notes from school and from home.