CORE WORDS

WHAT ARE CORE WORDS?

While the English language has at least 250,000 words, a list of only 200 words accounts for about 80% of the words you use every day! These words are called "core words", and when we give quick access to these words to people who need AAC devices to communicate, we give them the ability to say what they are thinking in almost any situation.

Core words tend to be very general words with multiple meanings. For example, "leave" and "go" mean the same thing. But "go" is a core word, and the dictionary lists almost 100 meanings and phrases using "go", from "leave" to "place where something belongs" ("it goes in there") to "make a particular sound" ("the cat goes meow") to "discuss something unpleasant" ("don't go there!") Having a word like "go" available is much more valuable for someone with space for limited words than the word "leave".

Core words are usually verbs ("go", "come"), adjectives ("good", "little"), prepositions ("to", "on"), pronouns ("you", "that"), articles ("the", "a"), and conjunctions ("and", "but"). Only about 10% of the first 200 core words are nouns, and these nouns are very general ("girl", "house") rather than specific ("porcupine", "celery").

WHAT ARE FRINGE WORDS?

Fringe words are very specific words that have a more narrow meaning than core words. They have a different kind of power - the power to precisely describe something in as few words as possible. Fringe words are usually nouns, but more specific verbs ("leap", "dice") and adjectives ("elegant", "obtuse") are fringe words as well. Each individual fringe word is not used as often as a core word, so AAC systems are usually arranged with the core words on the first, or "home" page, and fringe words are located in other folders. In Proloquo2Go, the fringe words are arranged in category folders - people, places, things, food, feelings, action words, etc.

The average English speaker uses about 20,000 words regularly. Since about 200 of these are core words, this means we use about 19,800 fringe words. But all fringe words are not equally important for every person. Everyone has certain subjects that they really love to talk about - the favorite people, places, and things in our lives. These words are different for each person, and one of the most important parts of setting up a vocabulary for someone is to make sure these words are available and easily reachable in the fringe folders.

HOW DO I TEACH CORE WORDS?

We can use pictures of most fringe words to teach their meaning, since most of the fringe words are nouns. But how do we teach core words like "is" or "do"? The answer turns out to be simple - we teach core words by using them on the AAC system while we talk. This is the way that typically developing children learn a language - the people around them speak to them in that language. They talk about what is happening around them, about what they're doing now, what they'll do in the future, what happened in the past. They have conversations, tell stories, tease and joke, have serious discussions. All of this talk happens in context - while real life is happening that relates to what is being talked about. Through this talk, typically developing children learn language. By the time children reach the age of 12 months they've heard 5 - 10 million words, and are able to say their own first words. By the age of 24 months, they've heard 10 - 20 million words, and are putting together 2 - 3 words in basic sentences.

WHAT IS MODELLING?

We also talk to children who have trouble developing speech, and this talk allows them to learn the spoken language that goes on around them. But it doesn't necessarily help them learn how to use their AAC system to speak back to us. Their AAC system uses a different language - there are pictures instead of spoken words, and once you've thought of what you want to say, you have the extra step of navigating the system to find the words. To learn how to use an AAC system, you need to see it and hear it in action in real-life situations, the same way children need to hear spoken language before they can speak it themselves. This is modelling - teaching someone how to do something by doing it yourself.

To model using an AAC system, simply use the system as you talk. There's no need to find every single word you speak on the system - just tap on the main words in the sentences you say. You're going to be modelling one step above where your child is now in his AAC system use. So for example if your child is not yet using the system to say words, you can tap on one word per sentence. If you're going to the market, you can use the system to say "go" as you say "let's go to the market". If your child is using the system to say 2 - 3 word sentences, you can use 3 - 4 words on the system - you might speak "we're going to see Dad" while you use the system to say "we go see Dad".

You do **not** need to ask your child to repeat back what you model on the system - this may make your child think of the AAC system as "work" rather than as his voice to use for what he wants to say. Just seeing you using the system to communicate in real situations is all your child needs!

AssistiveWare Core Word **Classroom**

WHAT ABOUT GRAMMAR?

You'll notice that what we recommend you say using the system is not always grammatical, and that's all right! You're speaking grammatically to your child with your voice, and using the AAC system at the same time to show them how, as a beginner, your child could use the system to get across the same message. All children are ungrammatical when they first start talking. Gradually they learn the grammar rules through hearing adults around them speak.

Once your child has started saying short sentences with his AAC system, you can start modeling more correct grammar. Again, follow the rule of modelling one step above where your child is. For example, if your child can say things like "I go school yesterday" or "I go park tomorrow", you can start modelling the correct past or future tense. You don't need to correct your child or make him repeat the sentence. Just rephrase the sentence yourself in a conversational say, so you're showing him on the AAC system how to say it more grammatically - "Oh, YOU WILL GO TO the park tomorrow? That sounds like fun!" or "Yes, YOU WENT TO school yesterday!" (the capitalized words are the ones you'd say on the AAC system while you say them with your voice. You don't need to say every word in the sentence. You just need to use the AAC system to model the parts of the sentence your child still needs help learning.)

WHAT IF MY CHILD ISN'T LOOKING WHILE I MODEL?

Keep on modelling! People have different ways of paying attention, especially people with neurological differences. Some people have trouble looking and listening at the same time. They may need to look away in order to really hear what you're saying. Others may need to move around or get other sensory needs met in order to pay attention. So while it may look like they are not listening, they may be doing what they need to in order to really hear and see what's going on.