

Getting started:

A look at how Key Word Sign can support communication

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Acknowledgement of Country

I **acknowledge** the **traditional owner** on the **lands** on which we **gather** and pay my **respects** to **elders past, present, and future**. I'd like to **welcome** any **Aboriginal** and **Torres Strait Islander people** here **today**.



Acknowledging the Deaf Community



Many Methods of
Communication

Key 
Word
Sign
*Australia*TM

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)

- Communication is about saying what you want, when you want, to whomever you want, however you want (Porter, 2004).
- Language is variable and fleeting (Farrall, 2021).
- “Everyday without words is trauma” (Jordyn Zimmerman, 2025).
- “If we give them the 26 letters of the alphabet, there’s nothing they can’t say” (David Koppenhaver, 2014)



Who is AAC appropriate for?



We have discovered increasingly that communication has only one prerequisite; it has nothing to do with mental age, chronological age, prerequisite skills, mathematical formulae, or any of the other models that have been developed to decide who is an AAC candidate and who is not. Breathing is the only prerequisite that is relevant to communication.

Breathing equals life, and life equals communication. It is that simple.

- Mirenda, 1993



Many ways to communicate – UNAIDED

Tone of voice

Speech

**Facial
Expression**

**Body
movements**

Gestures

**Manual
signs**



Many ways to communicate – AIDED

**Pictures &
Pictographs**

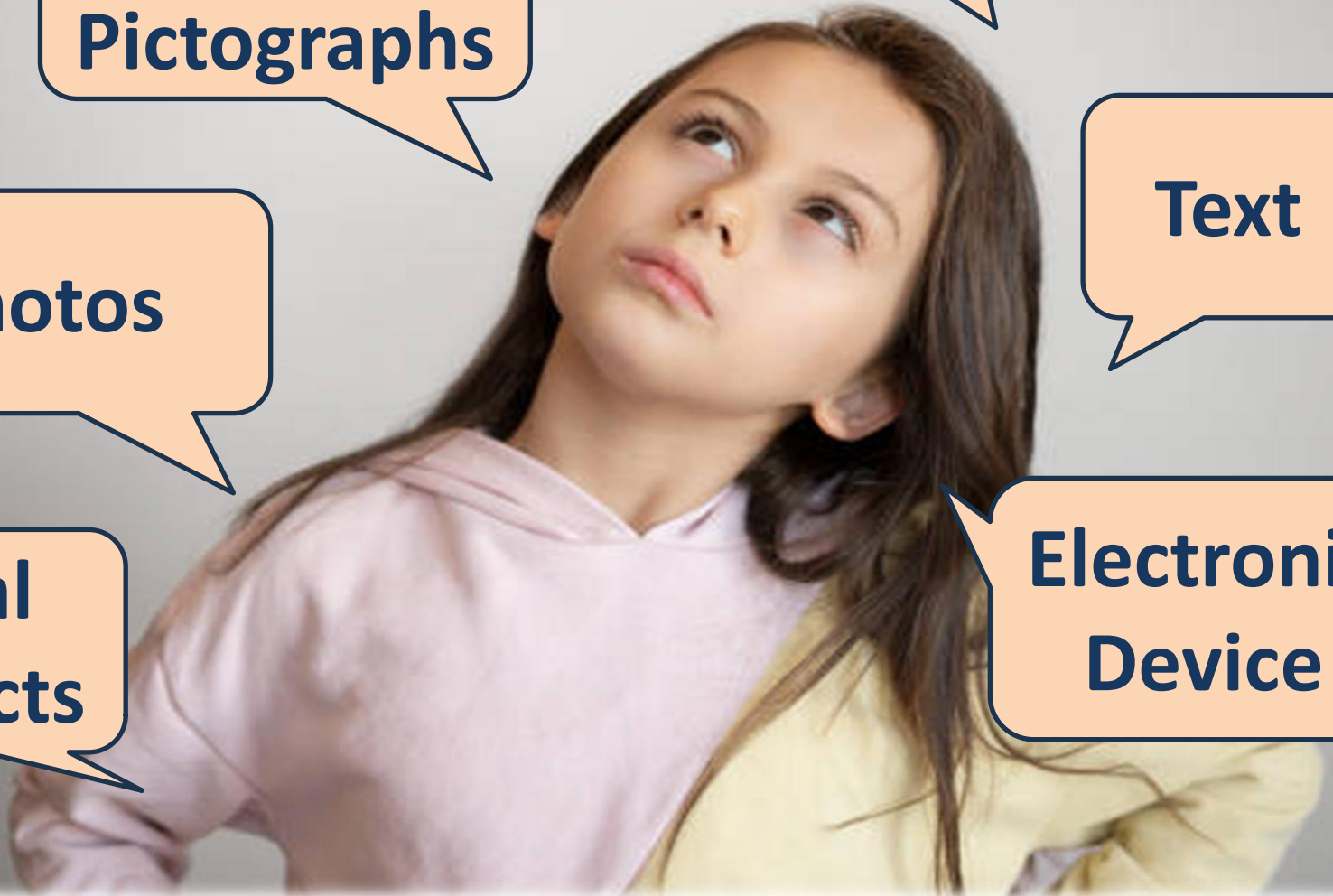
Logos

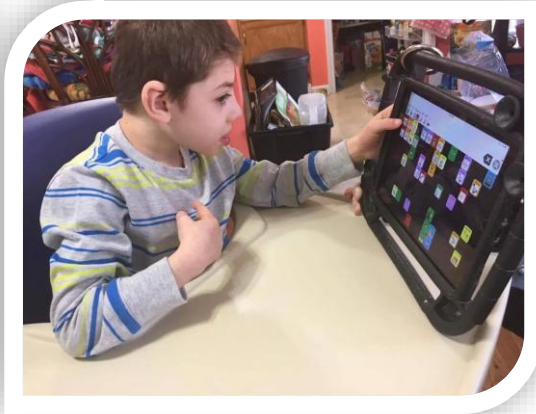
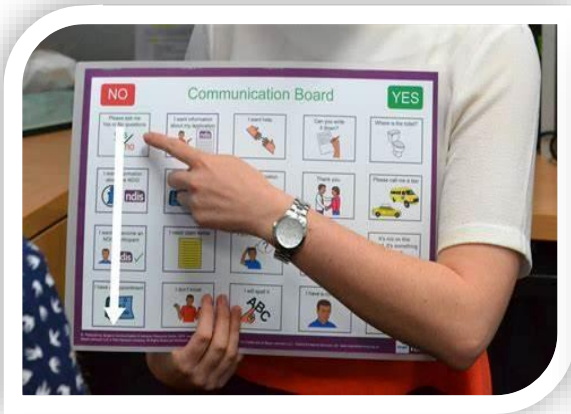
Photos

Text

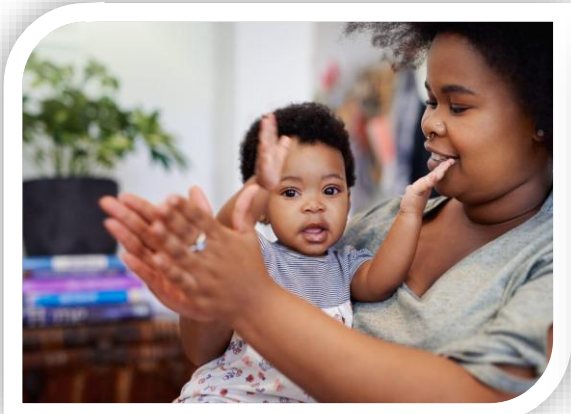
**Real
objects**

**Electronic
Device**





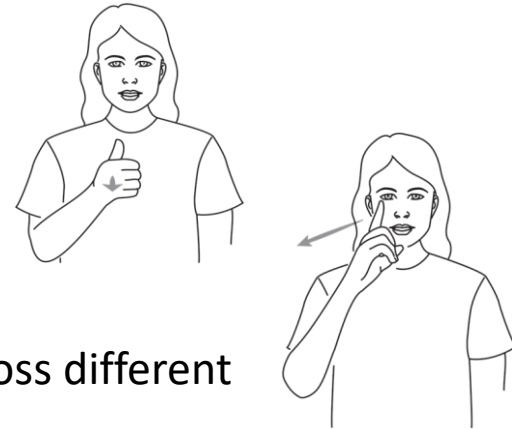
Multimodal communication is about having the **opportunity** and **choice** to use multiple preferred methods of communication – Aided and Unaided



What does the research say about KWS?

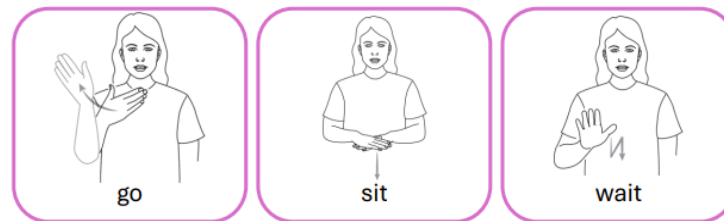
Goldin-Meadow & Alibali (2013) - On Gesture

- Gesture was found to have a role in:
 - Learning speech and language.
 - Expressive speech and language.
 - Helping children learn new information across different settings.
 - Helping communication partners to support and enhance communication development.



Meuris, Maes, De Meyer & Zink (2014)

- Use of translucent signs support in uptake and early success.
- Verbs were frequently used and should be introduced in initial sign sets.
- Vocabulary sets must be motivating.



Research Continued

Pattison & Robertson (2016):

- Not being able to share a message leads to:
 - Frustration
 - Passive communicator
 - Lack of opportunities for participation
- Using sign and speech together during activities improved number of words a child with ID used in a sentence.
- Showed evidence that using speech and sign together might improve expressive communication.

Rombout, Maes, & Zink (2017), and Cologon & Mevawalla (2018)

- One study on adults and one on children
- Communication partner training in KWS is key to shifting perceptions of people they work with.



What is Key Word Sign?

- A form of **unaided** AAC
- Evidence-based.
- A form of **manual signing**
- A way to build receptive and expressive communication.
- A tool to support people with communication disability or delay.
- One of many communication methods that can be used by people with communication disability

What isn't Key Word Sign?

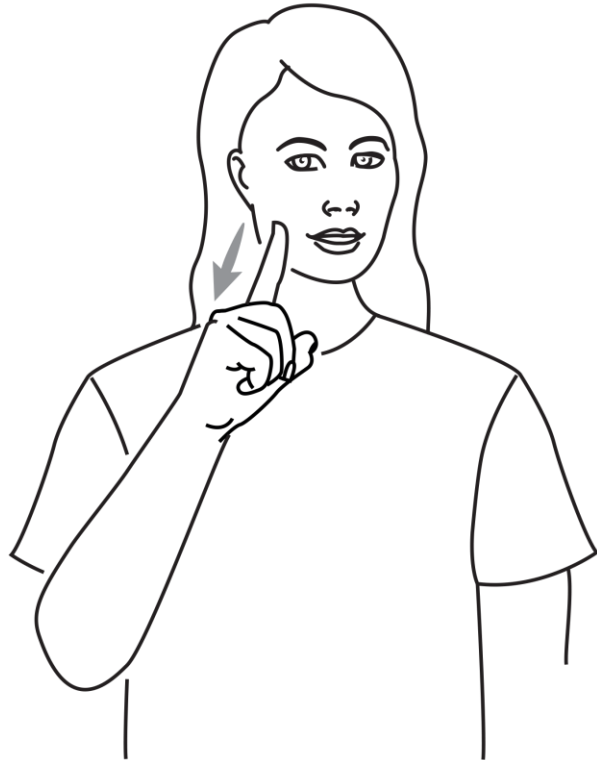
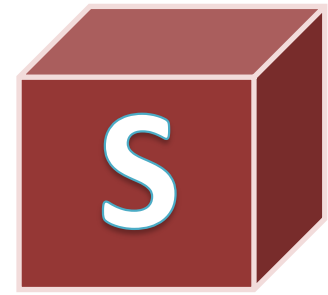
- Its own language (Auslan).
- It is **not** a simplified form of Auslan
- It is **not** a new signing system
- Used in isolation from other communication systems.



Principles of Key Word Sign

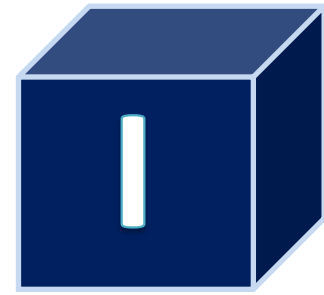


Features of Key Word Sign



1. Use **speech** and **sign** together

Features of Key Word Sign



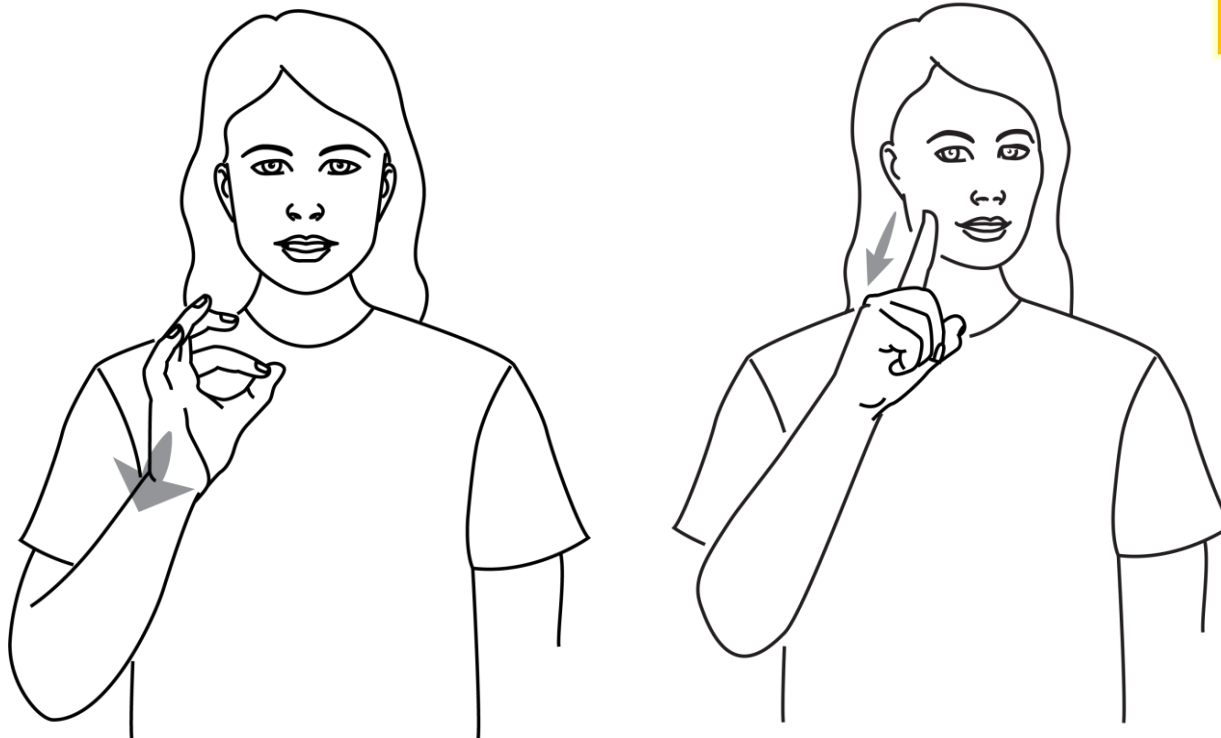
**2. Sign the important words
in a sentence.**

Features of Key Word Sign



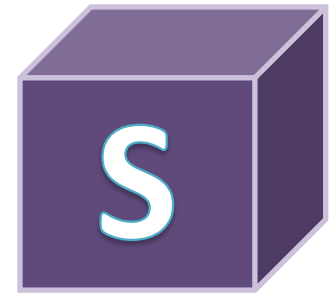
3. Use natural gestures

Features of Key Word Sign



4. Use **non-verbal** expression
to add meaning

Features of Key Word Sign



**5. Slow down and simplify
what you are saying**

Hand dominance when signing



Building
Communication
Environments with
Sign

Key
Word
Sign



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General Interactive Vocabulary

- A small number of words make up 75-85% of speech.
- We want words that can be used across environments.
- Provides language rich opportunities for both child and adult.
- It's fun and usable.
- Generally verbs, adverbs, and adjectives.
- Limited nouns, we don't just want to label.



General Interactive Vocabulary

Finished	Like
More	Food/Eat
Want	Drink
Help	Play
Go	Toilet



Finished



More



Want



Help



Go



Like



Eat



Drink



Play



Toilet



Practise Time!





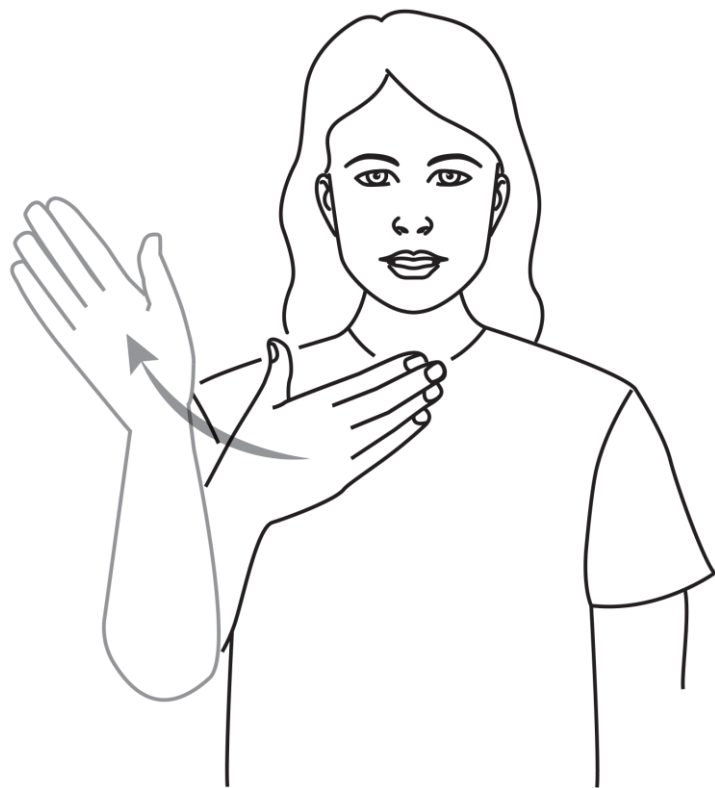
It's time to finish.



I can help you.



It's time to play.



We can go.



Let's have something
to eat.



I want a drink.

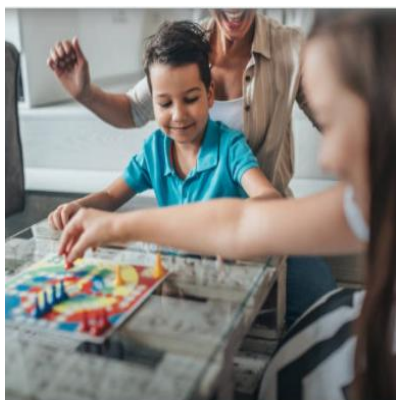
A few signs, but many things to say



Sing a
Song



Read a
Book



Play a
Game



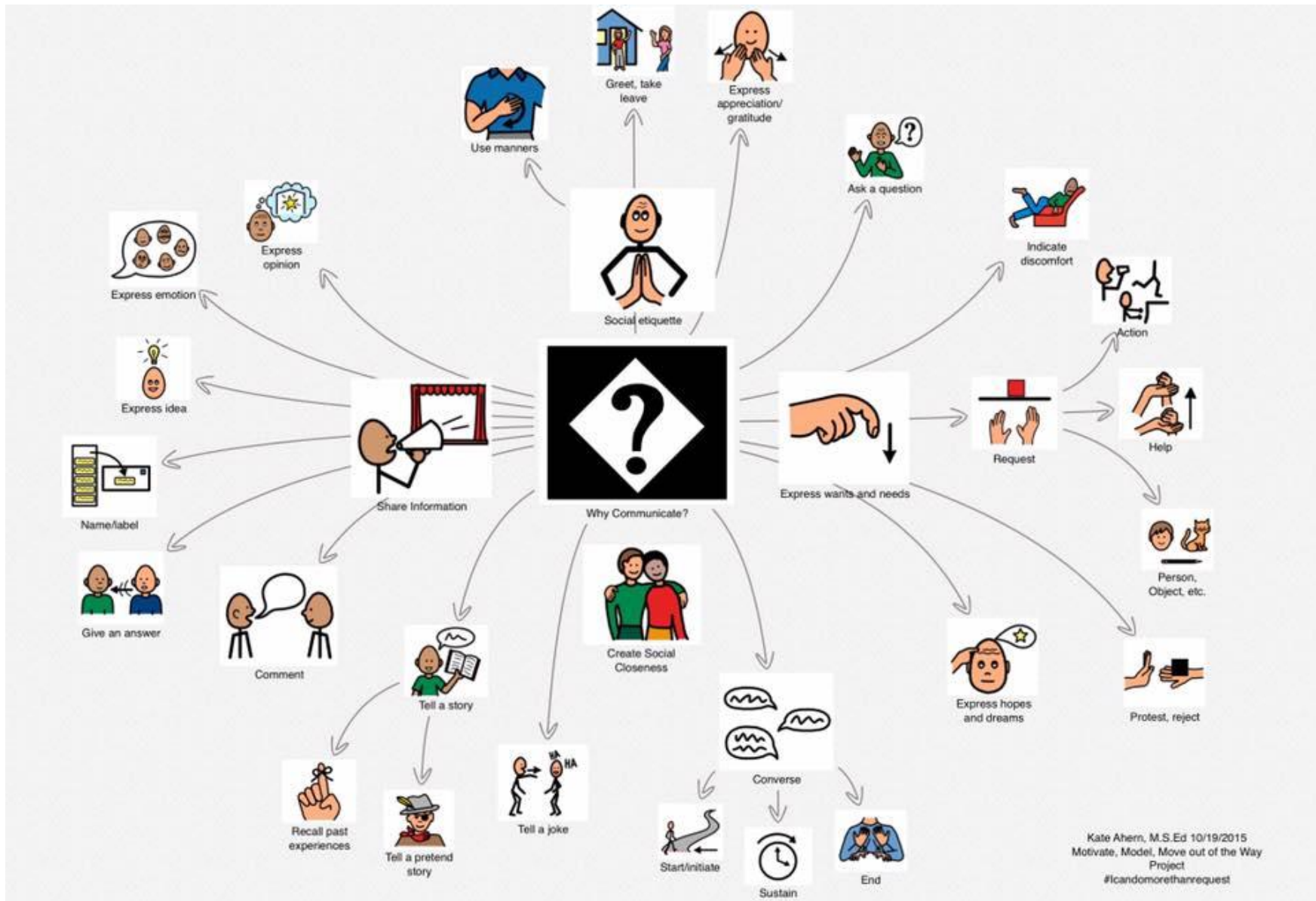
Familiar
Routine



Communication is all about...

- Connecting with others
- Building relationships
- Sharing experiences
- Successful exchange of information
- Shared understanding
- Meaningful interactions
- Participation and inclusion
- **Communication is a human right!**





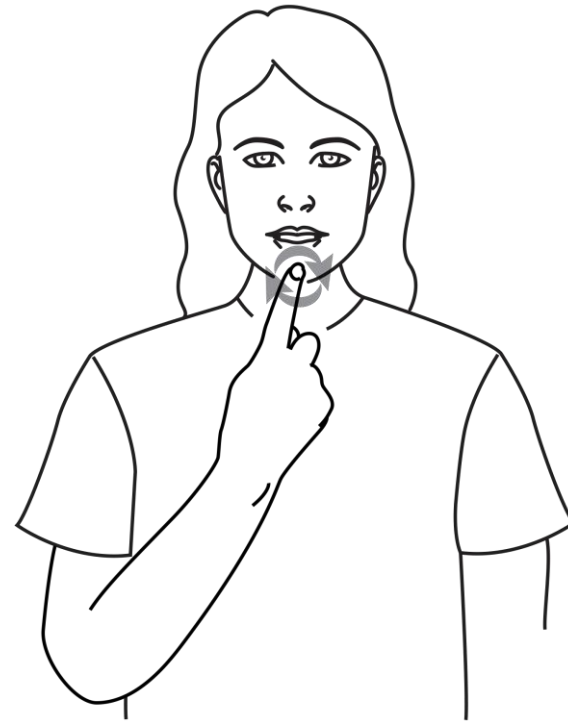
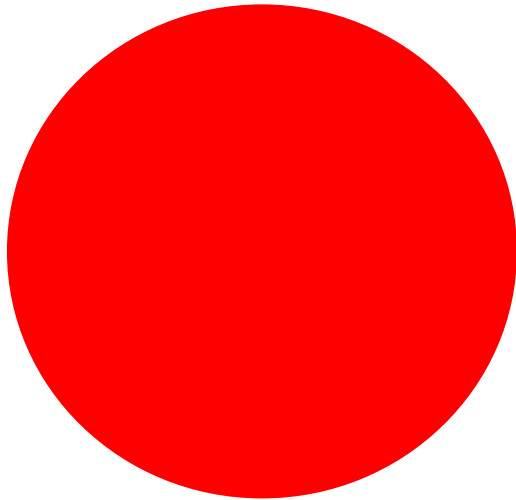
Kate Ahern, M.S.Ed 10/19/2015
 Motivate, Model, Move out of the Way
 Project
 #Icandomorethanrequest

I can Sing a Rainbow

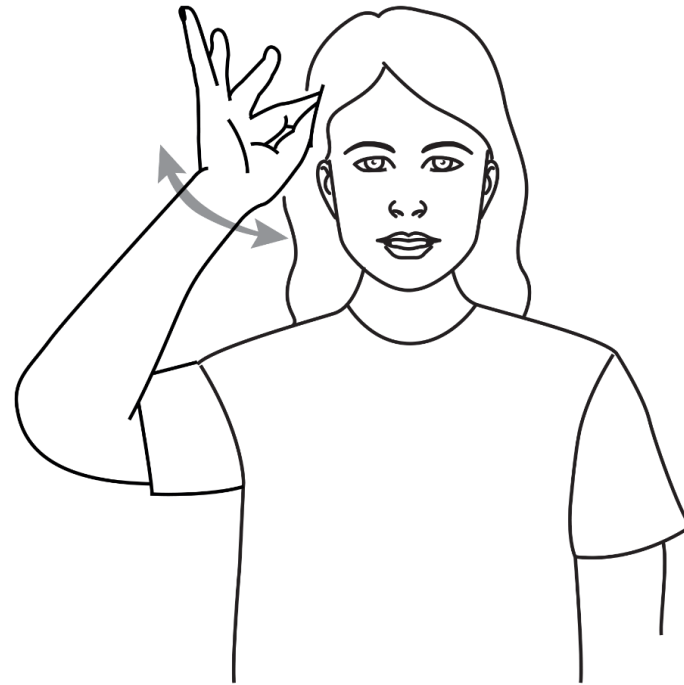
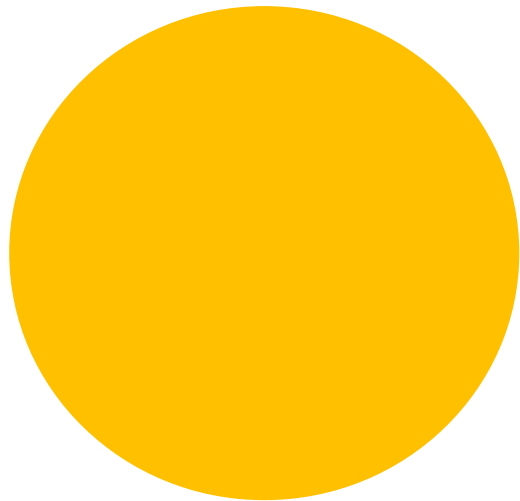
red	green	blue	rainbow	eyes
yellow	purple	I	too	ears
pink	orange	sing	listen	see



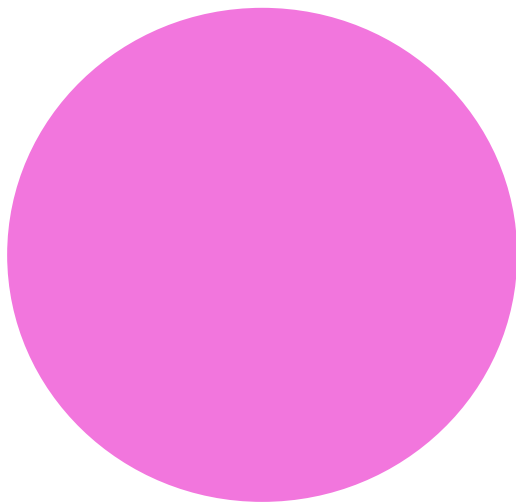
Red



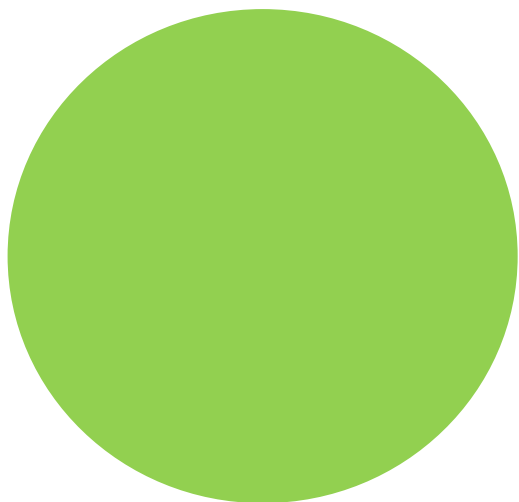
Yellow



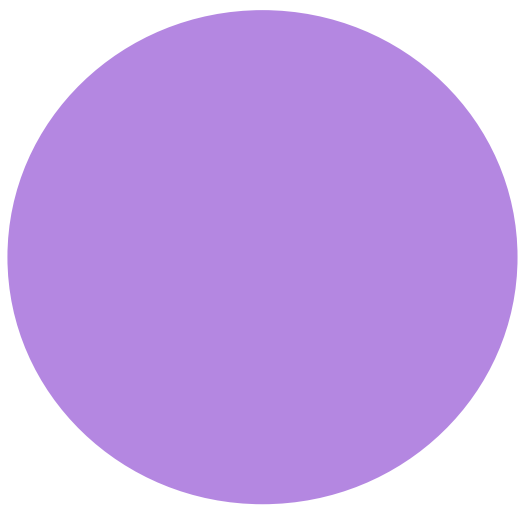
Pink



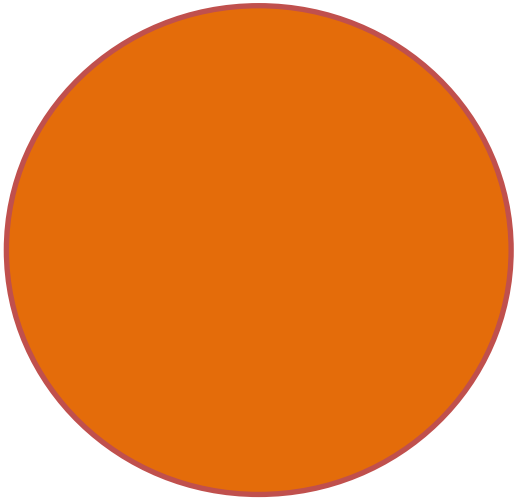
Green



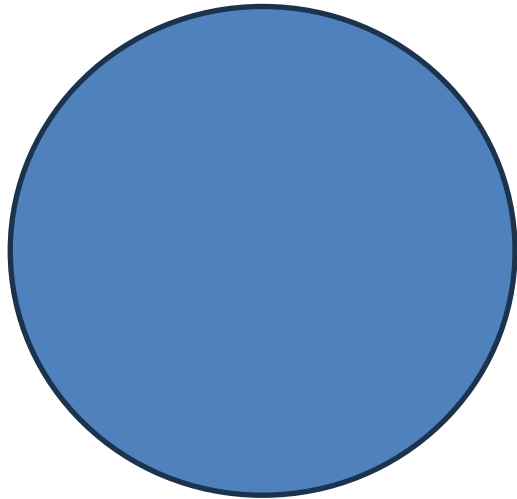
Purple



Orange



Blue





I or me

Point to self using extended dominant index finger (natural gesture).



sing

Move tips of extended dominant index and middle fingers upwards from corner of mouth in two shallow arcs.



rainbow

Hold open dominant hand, palm facing body, fingers spread and thumb closed, at shoulder height on non-dominant side. Sweep formation across body in an arc.



hear/listen

Place a slightly cupped dominant hand behind ear on same side, palm forward (natural gesture - mime the action).



see

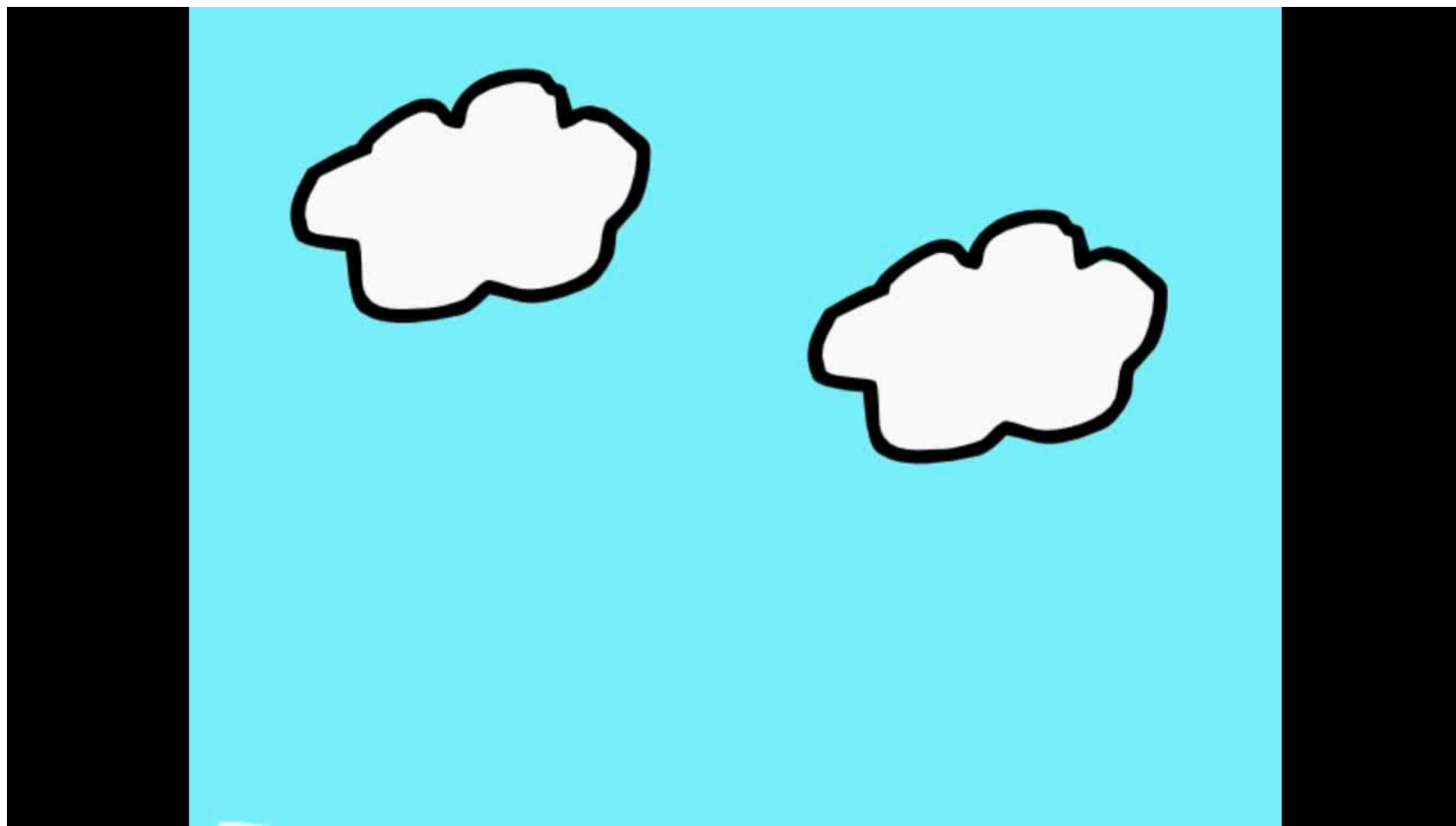
Move dominant index finger forward from eye (natural gesture). *May use index and middle fingers slightly apart.



same (also/too)

Point index fingers of both hands palms down and tap sides of index fingers together, twice.

I Can Sing a Rainbow





Key Word Sign and Literacy



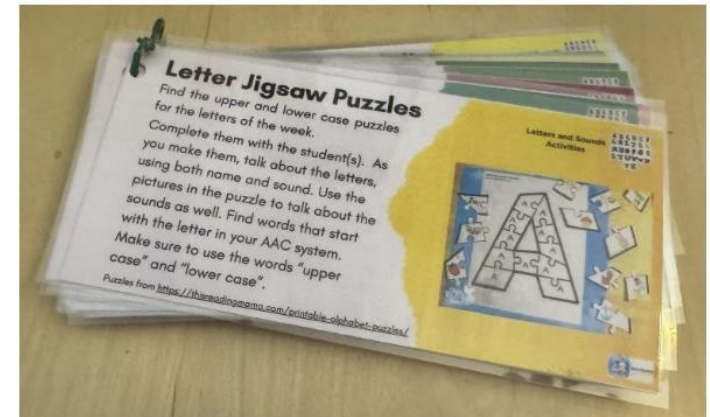
Teaching Letters and Sounds

- Brereton (2010) observed mainstream kindergarten students seemed to remember letters quicker when they saw the sign.
- Receptive language understanding is increased with KWS is used in a multimodal form during alphabet instruction (Kurt, 2011; Lamberth & Lambeth, 2013)
- Using KWS in literacy activities, such as Shared Reading, has been found to build joint attention and engagement (Frizelle et al. 2022)
- The use of repeated and simplistic language supports in grow of receptive and expressive communication. Use of AAC systems support this (Frizelle et al. 2022; Farrall, 2022; Porter, 2016)



What does this look like?

- Teach a minimum of two letters a week.
- Read and sign alphabet books.
- Sign and sign alphabet songs.
- Link letters and signs in environmental print.
- For activity ideas, check out janefarrall.com



The Letter A
TarHeel (MelodyQuick)



9 pages



Letter B
TarHeel (Rachel's Readers)



12 pages



My C Book
Jane Farrall



10 pages



Aa



Bb



Word Sign™
tralia

Shared Reading

The goal is to maximise interactions page-by-page.



How can integrating KWS into Shared Reading help?

- Frizelle et al. (2022) found:
 - Using KWS while reading increased child participation.
 - Children’s initiation and attention increased
 - Parents used shorter sentences and more utterances while reading.
- Jeremic et al. (2023) found:
 - Found asking questions using KWS during Shared Reading was associated with increased child participation and communication.
- Sheehy et al. (2023) found:
 - Teachers identified in the study that:
 - improved comprehension of the story by all children;
 - being inclusive of children with a disability;
 - that they had or intended to show the approach to other teachers in their school.



SHARED READING: SHARE THE AIR

Below are examples of Shared Reading Interactions, at different (student) language levels

These examples go with the book "The Very Hungry Caterpillar" by Eric Carle

Shared Reading Level	Student's Language Level	Example Attention Getter	Example Invite Participation	Student's possible Response	Example Adult modelled Response	Student(s) in class at this level
1	Receptive communicator/ early literal language	Look!	"Oh yum I like apples" (expectant pause)	No response or body language / facial expression response. Adult models a response, verbally referencing the student's body language at the time or as appropriate.	You smile when you have apples. I wonder if you're saying you like them!	
2	Early expressive communicator (1 – 2 words) / Literal language	That's funny!	"I wonder what he will eat next" (expectant pause)	Any response! (Adult might provide some scaffolding by navigating to the appropriate page in the AAC system)	Yes! We had cake didn't we. I liked it too (or other appropriate response)	
3	Expressive communicator (2 – 5+ words) / Literal language	Uh oh!	"I'm asking a question. I wonder what the caterpillar is doing here?!"	Eat fruit (completely independent)	Yes – but I don't think caterpillars really eat fruit!	
4	Expressive communicator (5+ words) / Inferential language	That's crazy	Where do you think he got the food from?	From the supermarket	That would be a good place to get food	

Words in red are modelled in student's AAC system



Adapted from Vander Woude, O & Van Kleeck, A & Veen, V. (2008). Book sharing and the development of meaning in Rhyner P. Emergent literacy and language development: Promoting learning in early childhood, pp.36 – 77. New York, NY: Guilford Press

Updated May 2024

Key Word Sign™
Australia

Dear Zoo



Dear Zoo

Key Word Sign Guide (Nationwide)



ampbell



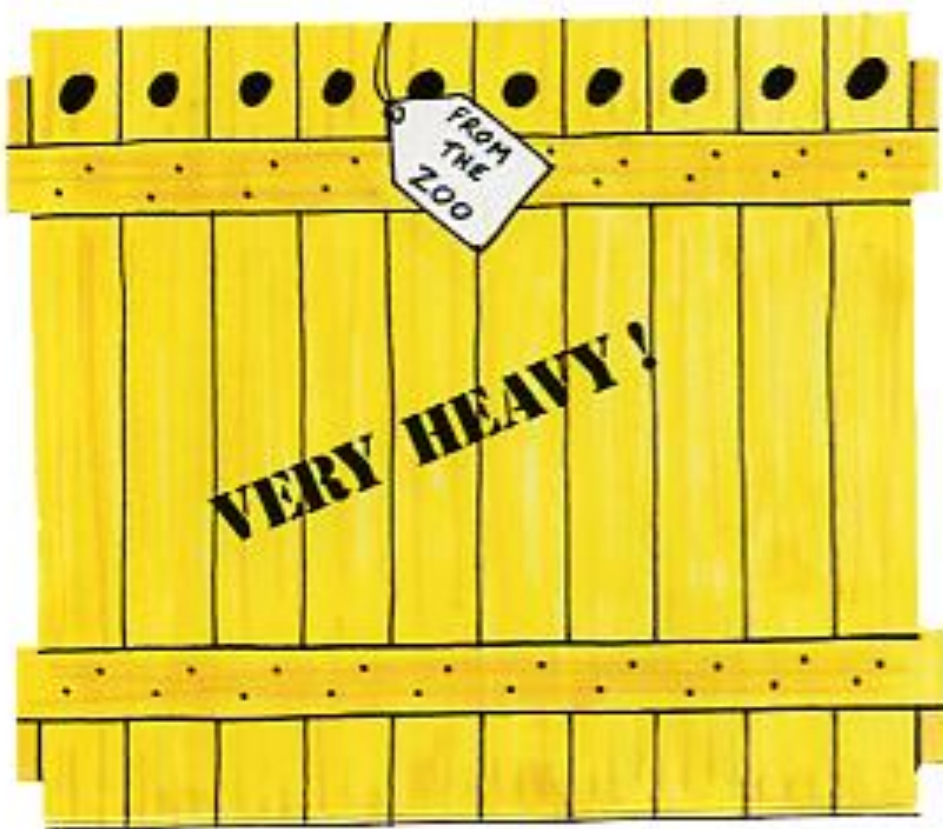
I **wrote** to the **zoo**



to **send me** a **pet..**

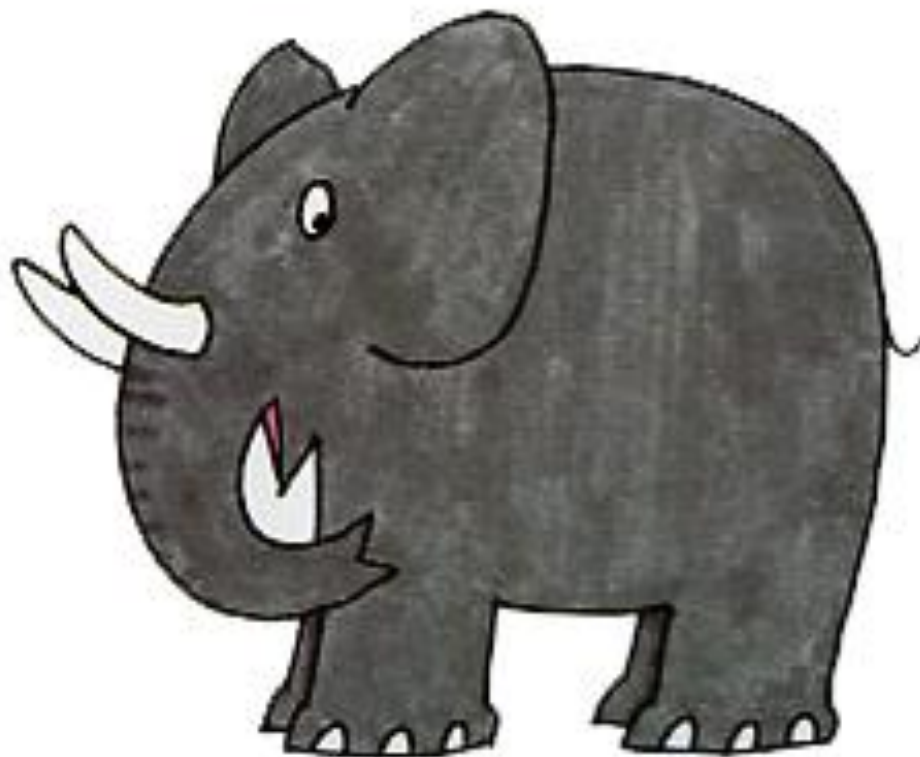


They **sent me** an...





elephant.



He was too **big!** I **sent him back.**



So they **sent me** a...



giraffe.





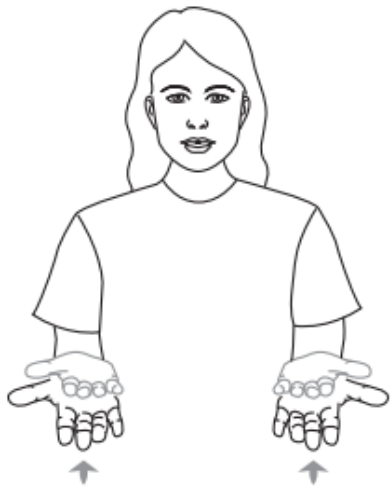
He was too **tall!**



I sent him **back.**



Attention Getter:
Oh, he's gone.
Invitation: I
wonder what
animal is next.
Respond: scaffold
response based
on the child's
attempt.



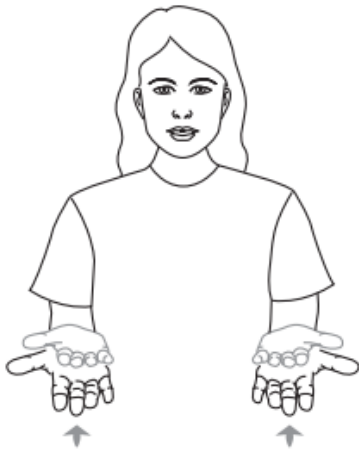
So they **sent me a... lion.**





He was too **fierce!** I **sent him back.**





So they **sent me a...**

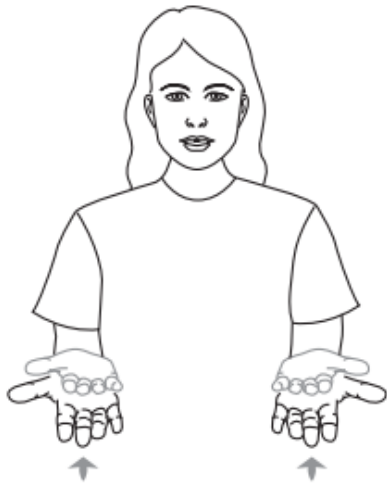


camel.





He was too **grumpy!** I **sent him back.**



So they **sent me** a...



snake.





Level 1

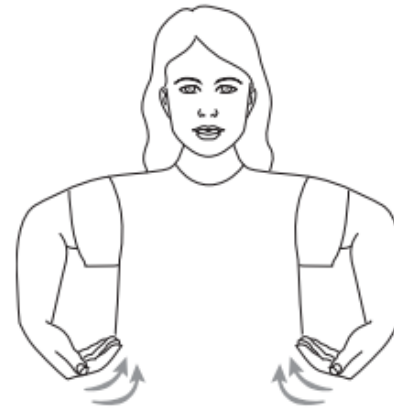
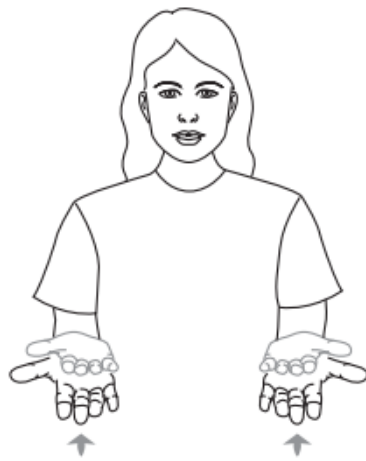
Attention Getter: Scary

Invitation: I don't want a scary snake.

Respond: based on reaction



He was too **scary!** I **sent him back.**



So they **sent me a... monkey.**





He was too **naughty!**

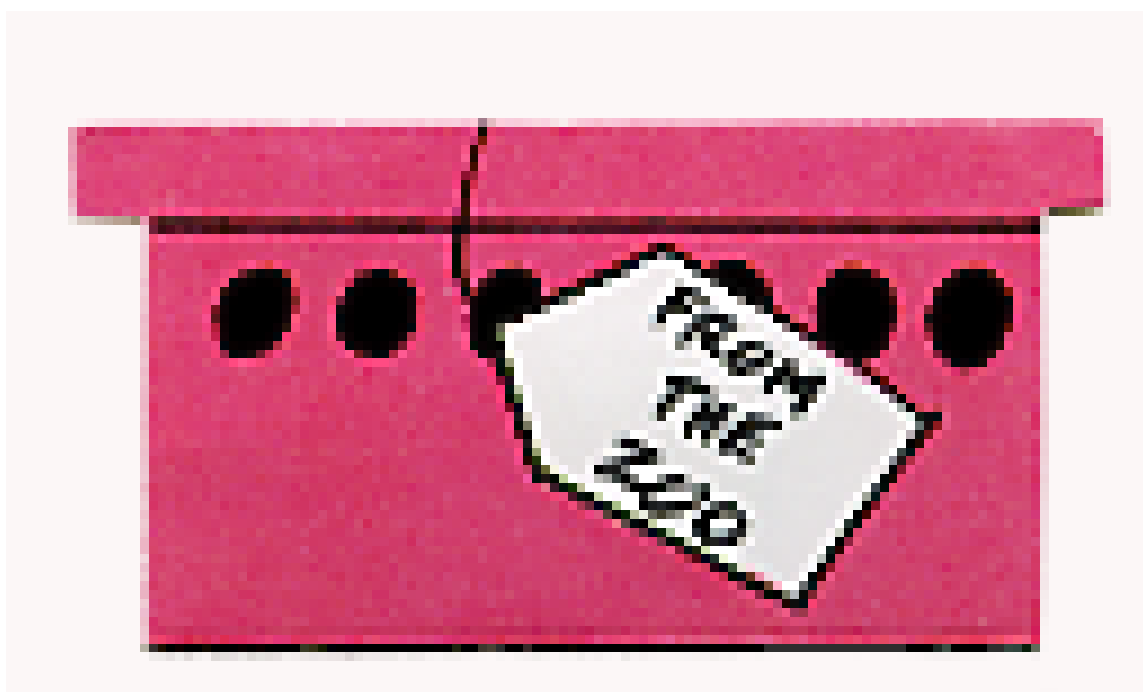


I sent him back.



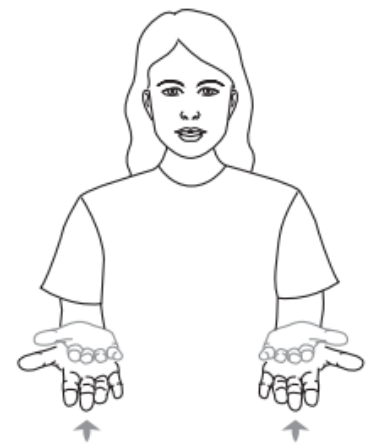


So they **sent me a... frog.**





He was too **jumpy!** I **sent him back.**



So they **thought** very hard, and **sent me** a...



puppy!





Level 3/4

Attention Getter: Aww a puppy.

Invitation: What animal would you like for a pet?

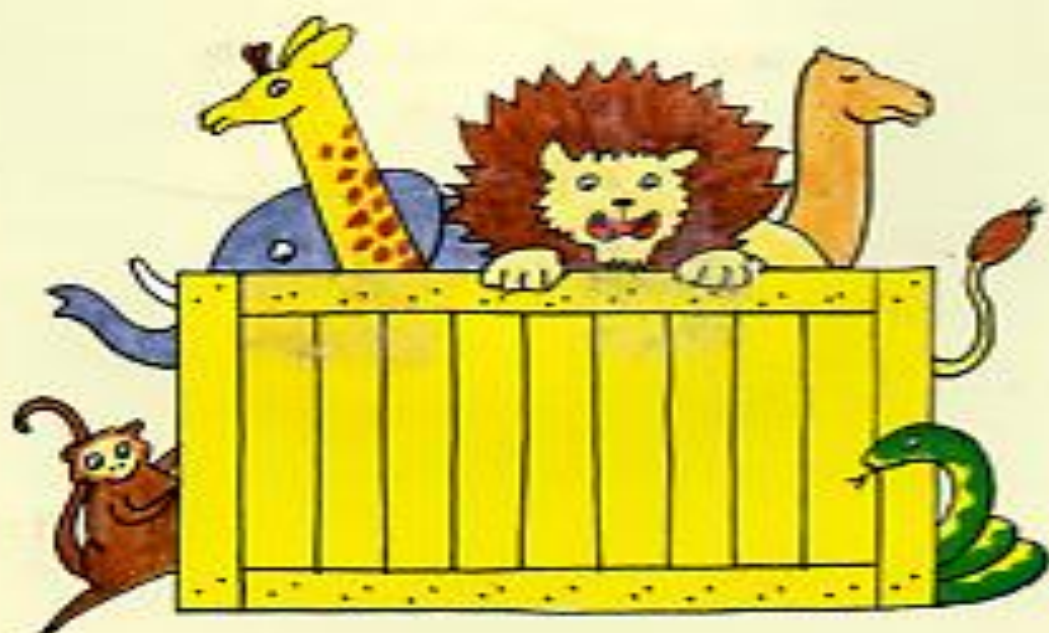
Respond: Based on the child's response.



He was **perfect!** I **kept him.**



What kind of pet would you like from the zoo?
An elephant, a lion, a snake, or something smaller?
Lift the flaps and see what has been sent
– it's bound to be a surprise!



Moving from talk to
action

Key
Word
Sign



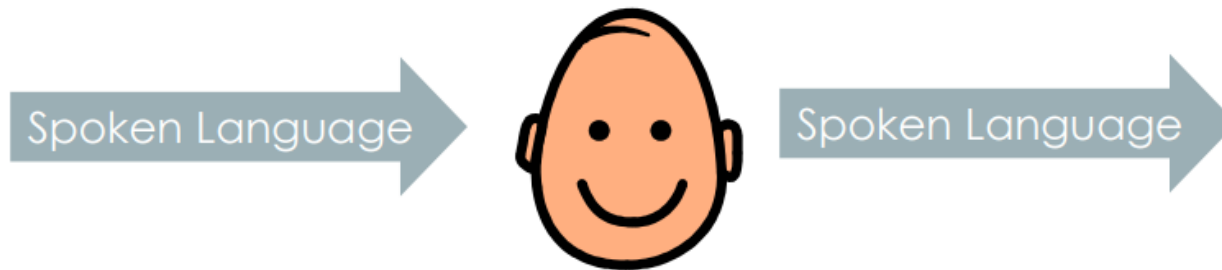
*Australia*TM

What goes in...

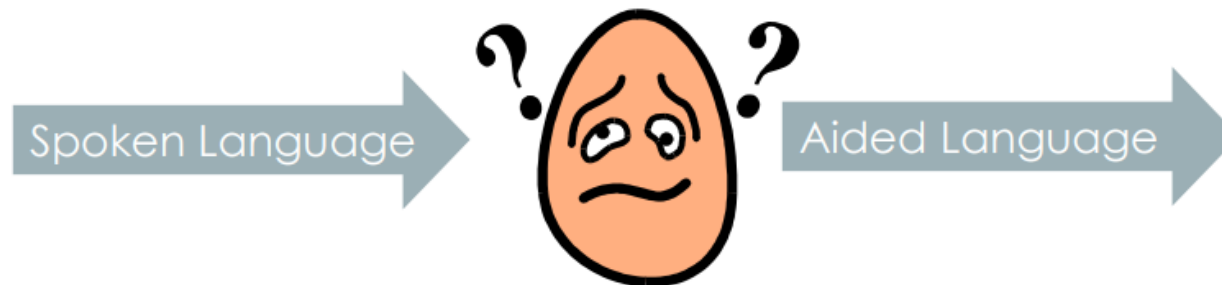
Input

Output

Spoken language development



Child learning aided symbols

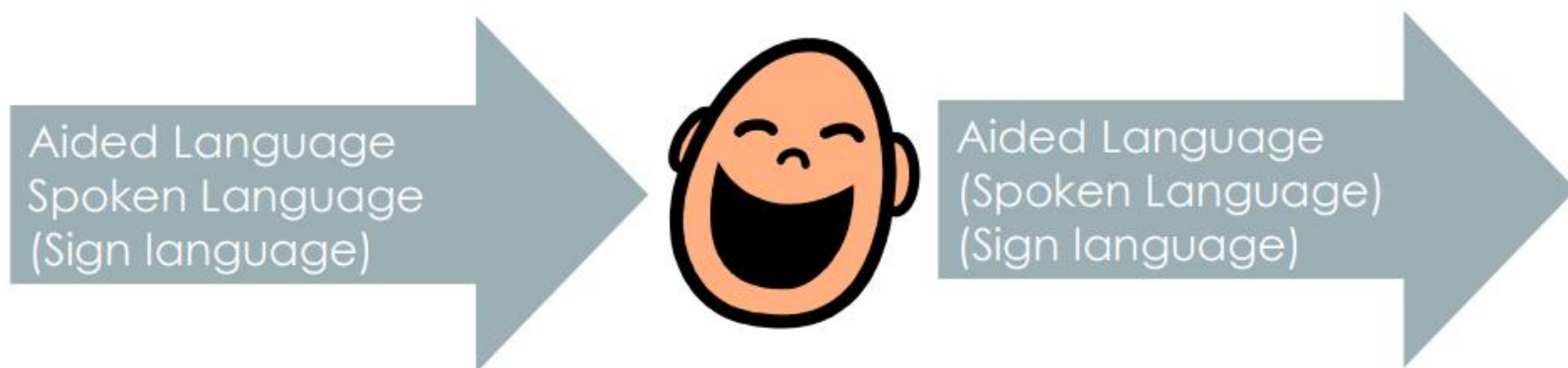


Porter (2004)

Input

Output

Child learning aided symbols

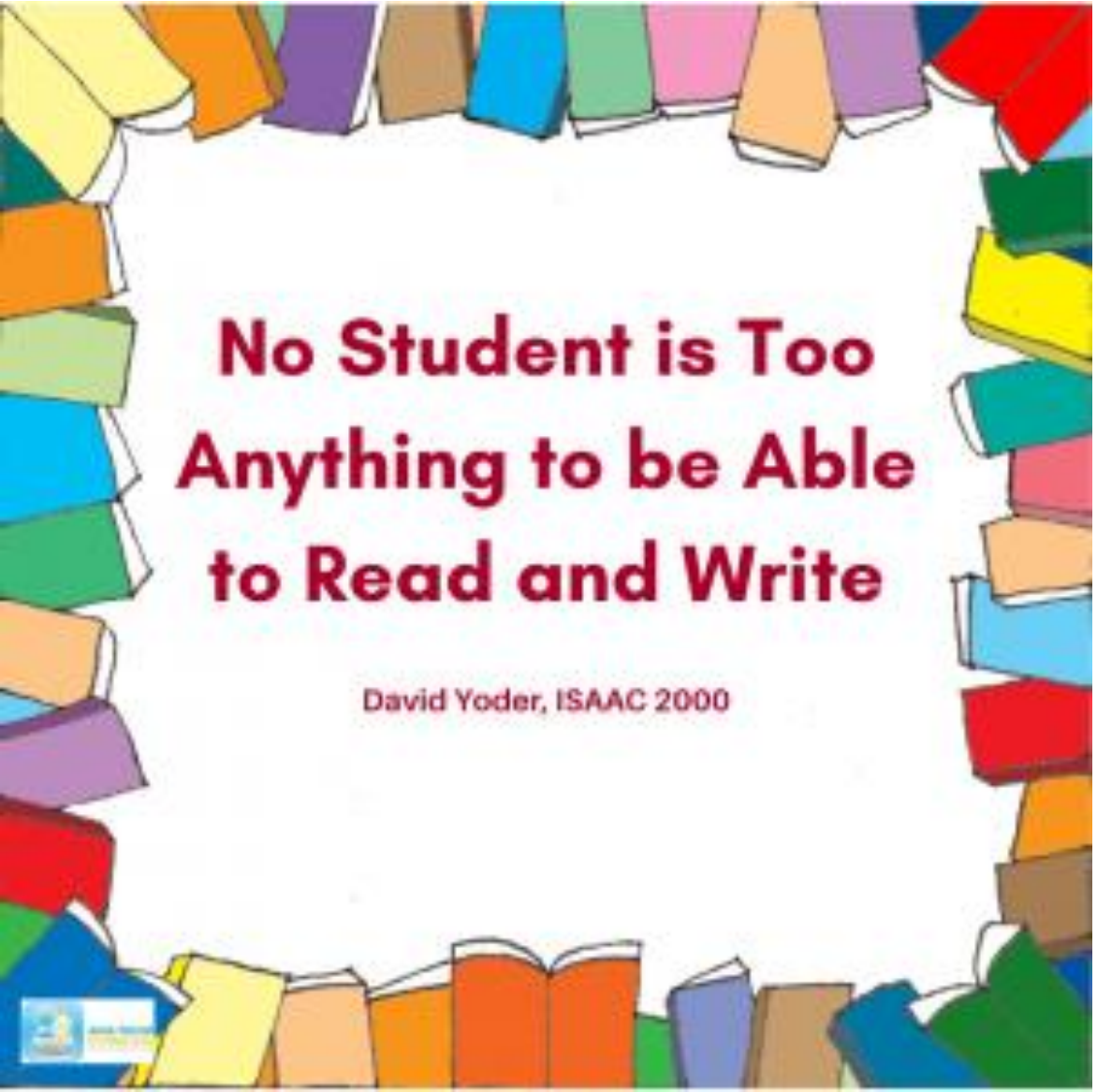


Porter (2004)

Where to from here?

- Think about how to link KWS into daily routines.
 - Songs
 - Toilet/bath time
 - Playtime
 - Sensory play
 - Art activities
- Make sure signs are relevant and usable across environments.
- Include signs of motivating items to encourage signing
- Model without expectations
- Attribute meaning
- Join us for a workshop!





No Student is Too Anything to be Able to Read and Write

David Yoder, ISAAC 2000

