



STEPS TO LANGUAGE

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Introduction

Steps to Language is a vocabulary package designed to support children to develop the skills needed for symbol based communication. It has 3 stages so that the child can gradually build their language skills in a similar way to how young children learn to talk. Some of the unique features that support this development include:

- ✓ A simple, colour-coded navigation system
- ✓ Access to an increasing selection of core words
- ✓ A guided selection system - when a core word is selected, a pathway is highlighted to suggest folders that the child might look in next to continue building a phrase
- ✓ A range of topic based folders
- ✓ Access to quick phrases for social language
- ✓ Phonic based keyboards with predictive text to support developing literacy skills

Who is Steps to Language for?

Steps to Language has been specifically designed for children using AAC, right from the very beginning of their journey, moving towards developing complex language skills. The 3 stages reflect a child's growing vocabulary, changing interests and development of literacy skills.

Steps to Language is available in a range of symbol sets, including PCS, SymbolStix and Widgit.

Within this manual you will find:

- ✓ The rationale and research behind Steps to Language

- ✓ A detailed exploration of each stage
- ✓ Aims and objectives for the child and their communication partner, lots of tips to help you to support the child to use Steps to Language successfully!

Theory and Research behind Steps to Language

How was steps to language developed?

Steps to Language was developed by Sarah Alderman, a Speech and Language Therapist who has worked in the field of AAC over the past 10 years. It was designed to consider some of the stumbling blocks that children who use AAC frequently face, with a particular emphasis on the idea of linking words to make phrases. Research tells us that toddlers start to combine words when they have a foundation of 35-50 single words. Yet, children who use AAC may have a strong knowledge of many symbols but still find it difficult to move past using single words to form phrases. Steps to Language allows the opportunity to practice putting words together with visual prompts to encourage sentence formation.

Steps to Language also incorporates ideas from a range of speech and language approaches. The layout of folders was influenced by Colourful Semantics, an approach used to support children to develop sentence structures. Pragmatically organised AAC systems were also considered in order to encourage natural, social language and conversation.

Steps to Language uses a core word approach. What does this mean?

Core words are the words that we use again and again across multiple contexts to get our message across. They make up approximately 80% of our overall language. Rather than specific nouns that we might use for requesting (e.g. book, TV, milk, etc), they are multi-functional words that are the building blocks of our sentences such as more, want, go, not, it, in, do, etc.

Steps to Language provides the child with access to an increasing selection of core words, recognising their importance while considering how they can be linked with fringe vocabulary (topic words that are context specific) to form phrases and sentences.

Why does Steps to Language have 3 different stages?

In everyday life, we modify our communication to meet the needs of our audience. For example, when talking to a 2 year old, you might say “No cookie. Dinner now” but you might relay the same message to a 9 year old using different language e.g. “You can’t eat the cookie now because it’s nearly dinner time”. Children who use AAC are no different! They initially need to learn to confidently use common words before we can begin to expose them to more difficult words and more complex sentences. Each stage considers the type of vocabulary that is useful and appropriate for the child’s age/stage of development based on research.

Why is Steps to Language colour coded?

Steps to Language uses a colour coding system called the Fitzgerald Key. Different types of words are represented as different colours. This makes it visually easier for the child and the adult supporting them to find the vocabulary that they want.

Modified Fitzgerald Key

People

Verbs

Adjectives

Questions

Places

Adverbs

Social

Nouns

Negation

How was the vocabulary selected at each stage?

The vocabulary selection at each stage of Steps to Language is based on 3 sources:

1. Typical language development and early vocabulary checklists (Banajee et al, 2003, Down Syndrome Enterprise, 2012)
2. Functional vocabulary for children who use AAC (Van Tatenhove, G.M, 2016)
3. Discussions with parents, teachers and the AAC users. These types of discussions have been really useful in terms of providing content that is both motivational and functional at different stages of communication!

Navigating Steps to Language

One of the key features of Steps to Language is its simple navigation. The navigation at each stage is similar to allow the child to develop motor patterns as to where vocabulary is stored.

At each stage you will find:

- ✓ A selection of core words on the left side of the home screen:
 - 6 core words at Stage 1
 - 15 core words at Stage 2
 - 20 core words at Stage 3
- ✓ Coloured folders on the right side of the home screen containing additional vocabulary and phrases:
 - 9 folders at Stage 1
 - 10 folders at Stage 2
 - 11 folders at Stage 3
- ✓ An increase in the amount of vocabulary per page at each stage:
 - 15 words per page at Stage 1
 - 20 words per page at Stage 2
 - 30 words per page at Stage 3
- ✓ Topic folders for practicing core vocabulary and sentence building.
The topics change depending on the child's language ability and interests related to their age; e.g. at Stage 1, you will find Play. At Stage 2 and 3, you will find Fun and Games.

- ✓ A message bar and quick access to 'yes' and 'no' at the top of the screen. At Stage 1 the child can clear messages, while at Stages 2 and 3, the child can edit messages by deleting single words
- ✓ Vocabulary is organised in terms of function or alphabetical order depending on the folder that is accessed. In folders that contain nouns such as People, Places and Things, vocabulary is listed in alphabetical order
- ✓ In each folder, there are links to other relevant folders that may expand on the vocabulary used
- ✓ Keyboards are available at each stage to support literacy development. At Stages 1 and 2, the keyboards are phonetic to match how literacy skills are initially taught. At Stage 3, the keyboard speaks the letter names. At all three stages, there is a word prediction feature to support use of the keyboard for communication
- ✓ Links to media such as photograph albums and YouTube are available at Stages 2 and 3 to provide age appropriate and motivating conversation starters
- ✓ There is a tips page at each stage. On these pages, you will find lots of helpful advice on implementing Steps to Language and editing the vocabulary package

Personalising Steps to Language

At each stage of Steps to Language you will find blank cells on certain pages to

allow for personalisation. This allows you to add things that are important to the child such as people, places, things or phrases. The main areas that can be edited at each stage are as follows:

✓ **People**

Here, you can add photos of friends, family members or school staff

✓ **Topics**

Some Topic pages have been left blank. They could be used to add vocabulary about an activity that the child does frequently, a place that they like to visit or a topic that is being covered in school

✓ **My news and stories**

This page is entirely blank to allow you to input stories that the child might want to frequently re-tell e.g. talking about a recent holiday, a birthday or school trip. Choose a symbol to help them to identify each news story

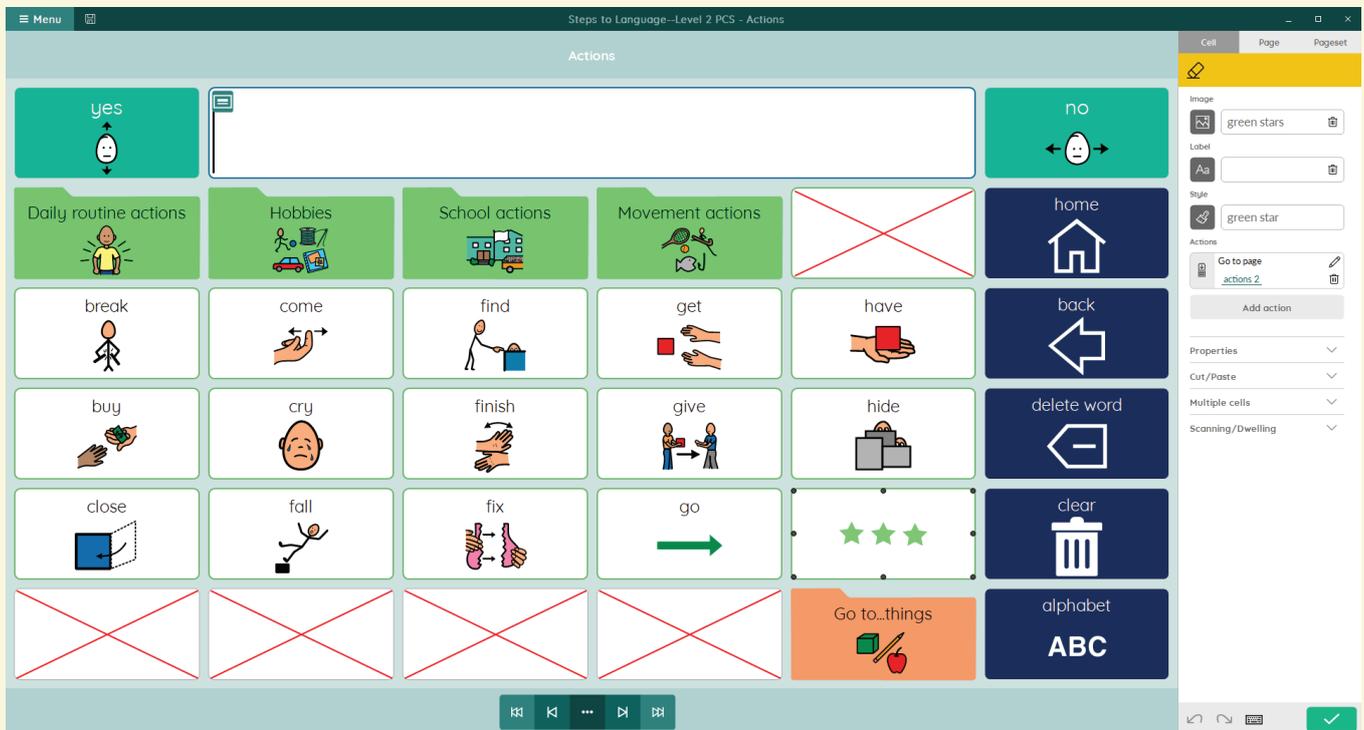
✓ **About me**

You can add personal information about the child in this section including family, favourite activities, pets, etc.

✓ **Categories**

On each category page you will find blank cells where items that are personal to the child such as toys or favourite TV programmes can be added. There are also 2 blank folders to store vocabulary that might be specific to the child's interest e.g. dinosaurs, planets, Pokemon, etc.

At Stages 2 and 3 you will also find the option to add additional pages in folders where there is a large amount of vocabulary. Selecting the cell with 3 stars will take you to a mainly blank page. You can attach additional pages in edit mode.



Using the guided selection feature

The guided selection feature is designed to support a child to learn to combine core words with additional vocabulary to begin to build phrases and eventually sentences. This feature is available at stages 1 and 2.

When the child selects one of the core words on the left hand side of the screen, a number of folders are highlighted, while others are dimmed. All folders are still accessible but the aim is to demonstrate where the child might go next to develop their message further. This is based on the type of word that is selected.

For example, the word ‘want’ implies that the child is making a request so folders with this type of vocabulary are then highlighted: people, actions, things and describe (which includes colours and shapes). If you want to clear the guided selection pathway, you can do this by selecting the ‘clear’ button.

This feature can act as guide for a child learning to combine symbols. This is typically a difficult skill for many young children learning to use AAC and requires lots of modelling.

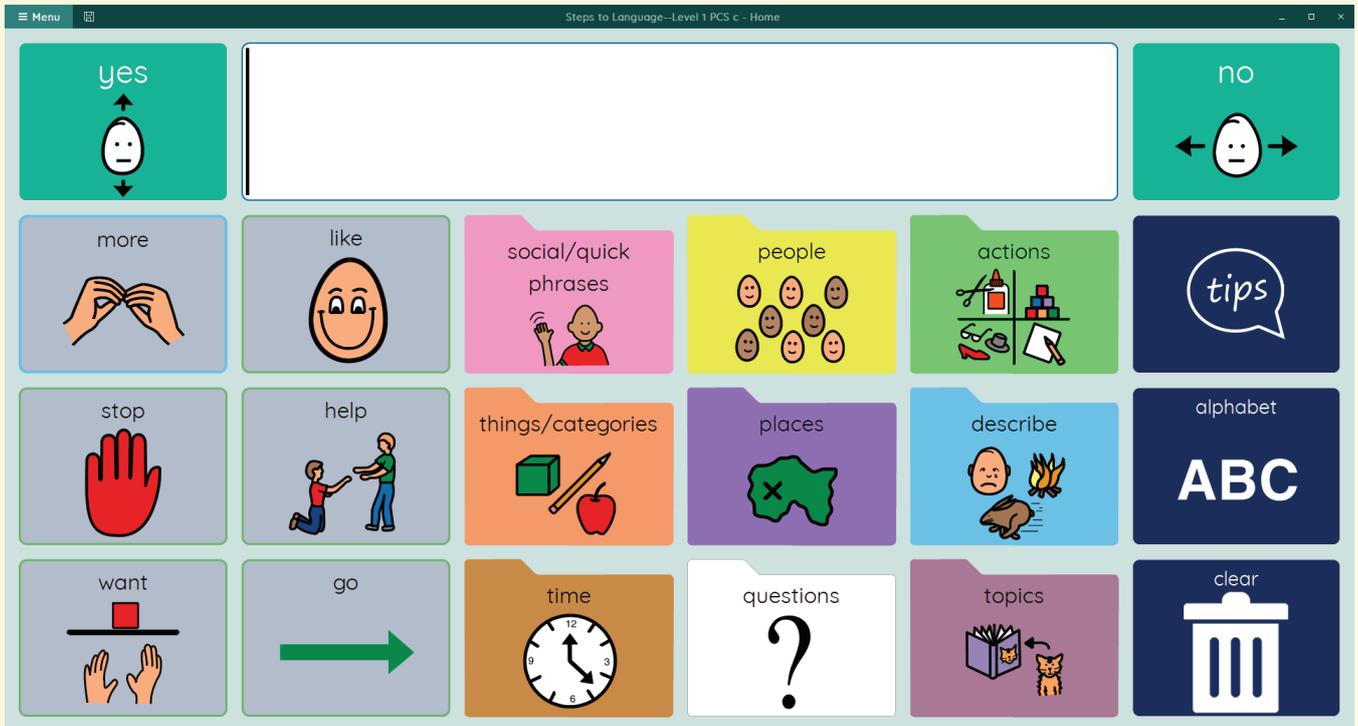
The guided selection feature aims to provide this model when a communication partner cannot.

If you want to turn off the guided selection feature, you can do so by selecting the Tips page and opening the ‘Turn on/off guided selection’ button.

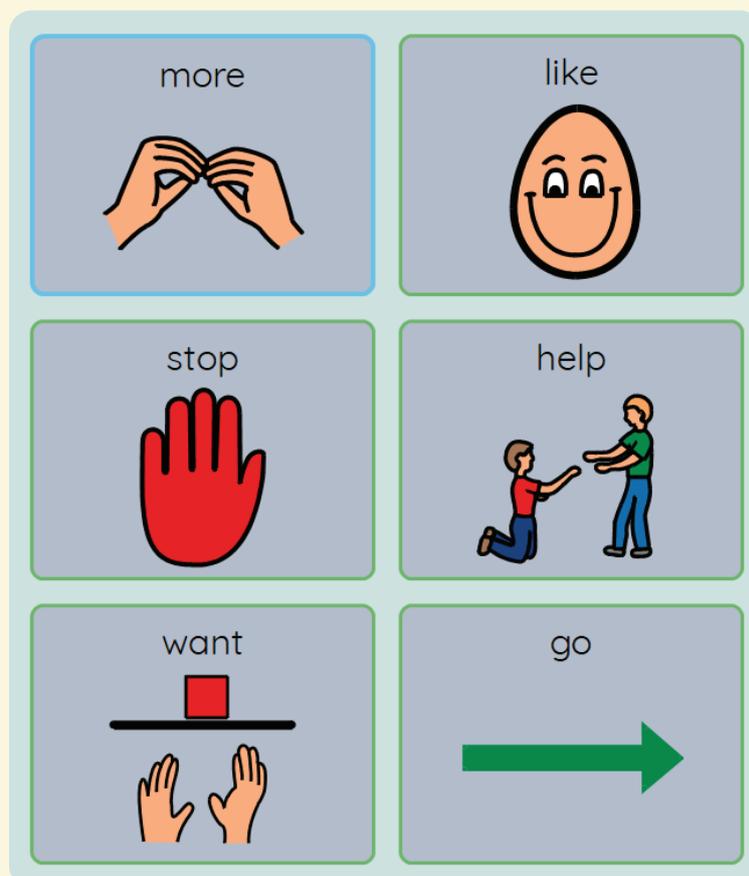


Steps to Language - Stage One

Steps to Language Stage 1 is a great place to explore using symbols for communication. It can be used with a child who is starting out on their communication journey or a child who has had some exposure to symbol communication through the models of others. The unique features of Steps to Language support the child to gradually develop skills in line with typical language development.



The core vocabulary has been carefully selected to reflect common first words of young children, with particular reference to words that are functional. The 6 core words included at this stage are:



The fringe vocabulary is organised within 9 folders. The function of each folder is as follows:

✓ **Social/quick phrases**

This includes greetings and pre-stored phrases that the child may need to gain attention or join in with an activity. There is also an 'About Me' folder to store personal information about the child such as their name, hobbies and pets. The 'My news and Stories' folder is also located here

✓ **People**

The pronouns 'me' and 'you' are introduced here. There are additional spaces to add friends or relatives who the child sees frequently

✓ **Actions**

This folder contains verbs that are common, everyday actions. There is also a 'Hobbies' folder to talk more specifically about fun actions such as read, sing, play, etc.

✓ **Places**

Everyday places and important rooms of the house are listed in this folder.

✓ **Things/Categories**

This is where most nouns and groups of words are stored. You will find additional folders for: Choices, Food, Animals, Toys, Clothes, Transport, Furniture and Body Parts. There are blank folders to add additional vocabulary specific to the child

✓ **Describe**

There are multiple folders within Describe, each including adjectives such as feelings, colours and words used for commenting

✓ Time

This folder includes time words such as 'now', 'tomorrow', 'night', etc.

It also includes a folder with special holidays such as Christmas and Easter

✓ Questions

Common question words and pre-stored questions are listed here to encourage social communication

✓ Topics

The topic section is a great way to practice using core words and navigating between folders. Topics at this stage are relevant to the child's interest and stage of development such as 'play', 'make' and 'snack'

At this stage, there are 3 simple aims for the child:

1. To become familiar with 6 core words

The 6 core words on the home screen are words that can be used again and again across multiple activities. Learning to use these words allows the child to make requests, comment and respond to simple conversation.

You will also find these core words within the topic folders, with the aim of supporting the child to develop their understanding and use of the words within the context of an activity. You can chat about how these words are also found on their home screen.

2. To watch how symbols join together to make phrases in the message bar

One of primary aims of Steps to Language is to support the child to gradually create phrases by combining symbols.

Once the child selects a core word, the guided selection system highlights possible folders to show the child where they might go next.

This is a visual way to help the child understand how words connect together to build phrases. The communication partner can support the child by clearing messages so that the child's main focus is on exploring building a message.

Within each folder, you will also find 'Go to...' buttons. These suggest other folders that may link with the vocabulary selected, making it quicker and easier for the child to build on their message.

3. To develop early navigation skills, using the Home and Back buttons

At stage 1, the child will require support from the communication partner to navigate to different folders. Always talk the child through each step so that they can eventually learn to do this independently.

Similarly, talk about using the 'home' and 'back' buttons when you select them e.g. "I want to use my core words; let's go to the home page". Encourage the child to explore using these features. Using the 'back' button with the Topics folder can be a good way to demonstrate how it works.

At Stage 1, there are also 2 aims for the adult supporting the child:

- i. To model using core vocabulary across daily activities
- ii. To support the child to navigate to appropriate folders

Progressing to Level 2

A child is ready to progress to the next stage of Steps to Language when they are:

- ✓ Confidently using the 6 core words
- ✓ Independently exploring folders with less support
- ✓ Beginning to make some simple word combinations or short phrase

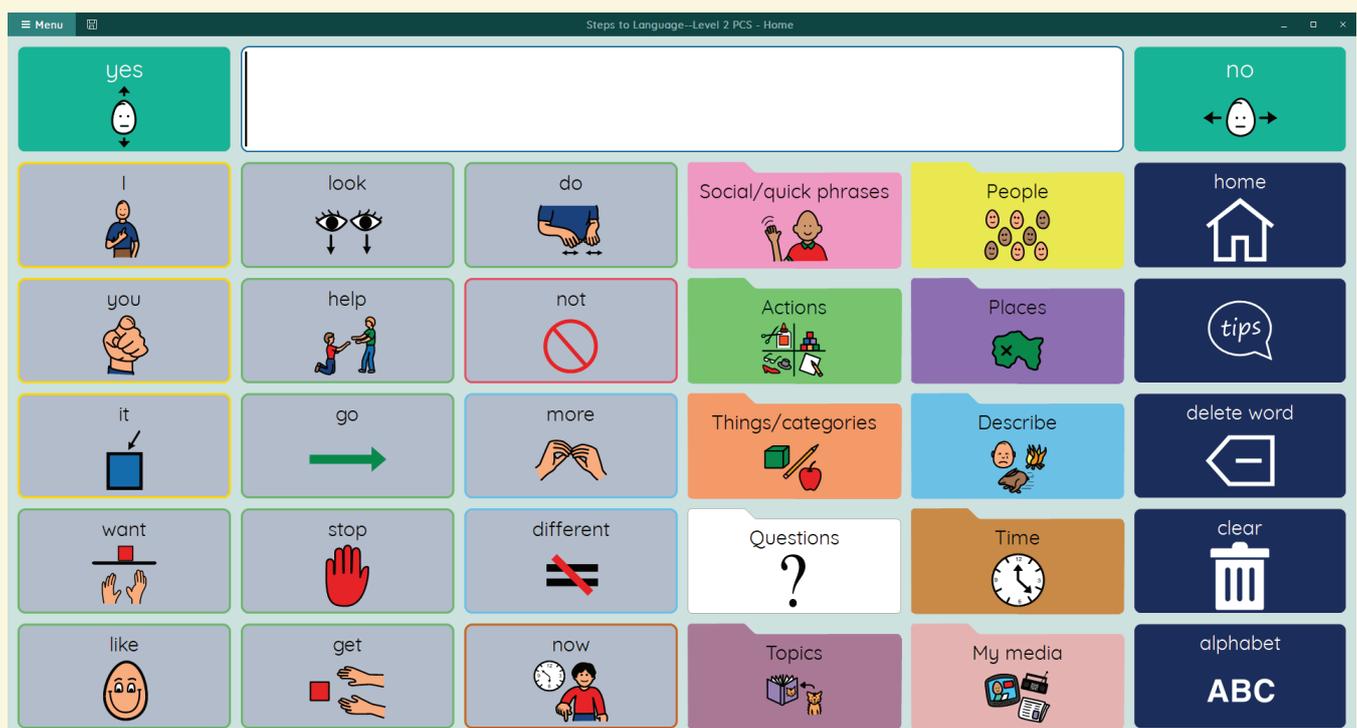
You may want to initially dip in to stage 2 to introduce it, while still using stage 1 for daily activities. This will give the child the opportunity to explore level 2 and

will also help you to see if they are ready to progress. Moving between the stages can be a gradual process.

Steps to Language

- Stage Two

Steps to Language Stage 2 builds on the skills developed from Stage 1. You will immediately see that the home screen is similar but with the addition of 9 new core words and 1 new folder. There are more opportunities to build phrases and to use more complex vocabulary that reflects the demands of the classroom as well as the child's maturing social skills.

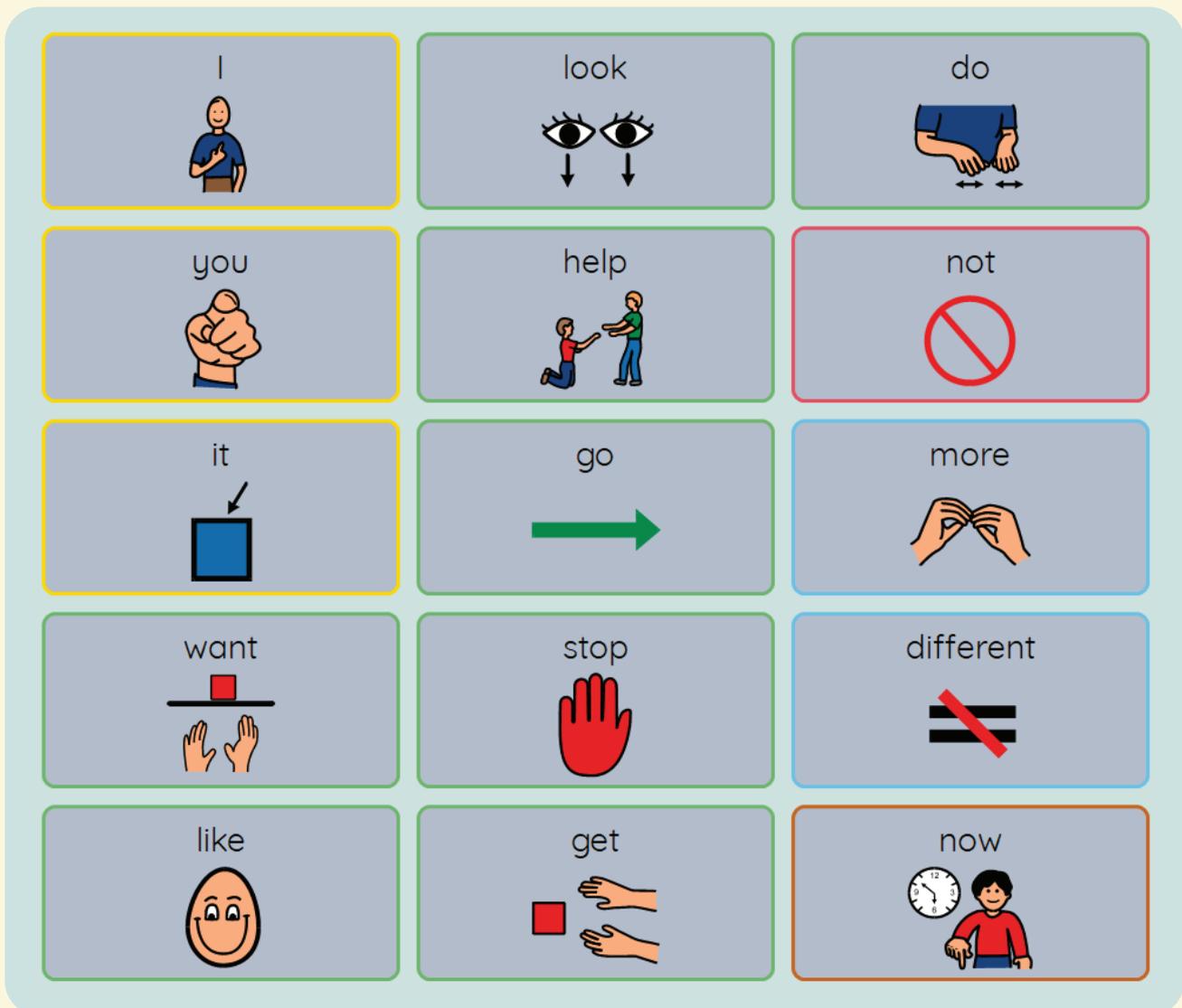


The other key differences at Stage 2 include:

- ✓ An increase in vocabulary on each page. There are now 20 vocabulary cells on each page.
- ✓ More sub-categories within folders,
- ✓ Increased operational functions - there is the addition of a 'delete' button to delete single words

- ✓ Introduction of 2 grammar folders: Pronouns (in people) and Prepositions (in places)
- ✓ Topics reflect changing interests e.g. instead of 'play', there is 'Fun and Games'. A 'work' folder has been added to reflect the change in demands within the school environment
- ✓ The 'My media' folder allows the child to add photographs and use YouTube.

The core words at Stage 2 include:



At Stage 2, there are 3 new aims for the child:

1. To begin to link a core word with a fringe word (words within the folders)
As before, selecting a core word activates the guided selection feature.

At this stage, the child should be becoming more familiar with how core words and fringe vocabulary fit together.

Continue to provide models. For example, if the child uses a single word, add an extra word; e.g. if the child said “look”, you could say “Yes look at the ‘rain’”, selecting the additional word. The child can also practice using this skill with a reduced number of core words in the Topics folders.

2. To begin to use operational functions including the message bar, delete word and clear.

At stage 1, the focus is mainly on exploring creating a message. At stage 2, the child can learn to control and refine this message by selecting the message bar to speak a full message, clear entire messages or delete single words.

To support the child to do this, model the function of these buttons so that the child can learn the skills involved.

3. To begin to understand and use simple elements of grammar.

At stage 2, there are 2 new subcategories added relating to grammar:

‘Pronouns’ within the people folder and ‘Prepositions’ within the places folder. These folders have a bold outline to indicate that they are different to other sub-category folders.

The Pronouns folder contains the little words that we use to refer to people such as he, she and us. The Prepositions folder contains the little words that we use to talk spatially about where an item is such as in, under and behind. You can read more about supporting the child to use these folders by selecting the tip ‘Introducing grammar elements - pronouns and prepositions’.

At Stage 2, there are 2 aims for the adult supporting the child:

- ✓ To support the child to develop understanding of the vocabulary within the new grammar folders and the negative core word 'not'
- ✓ To expand on the child's single word utterances or short phrases by adding an extra word.

When is a child ready to progress to Stage 3 of Steps to Language?

A child is ready to progress to stage 3 of Steps to Language when they are:

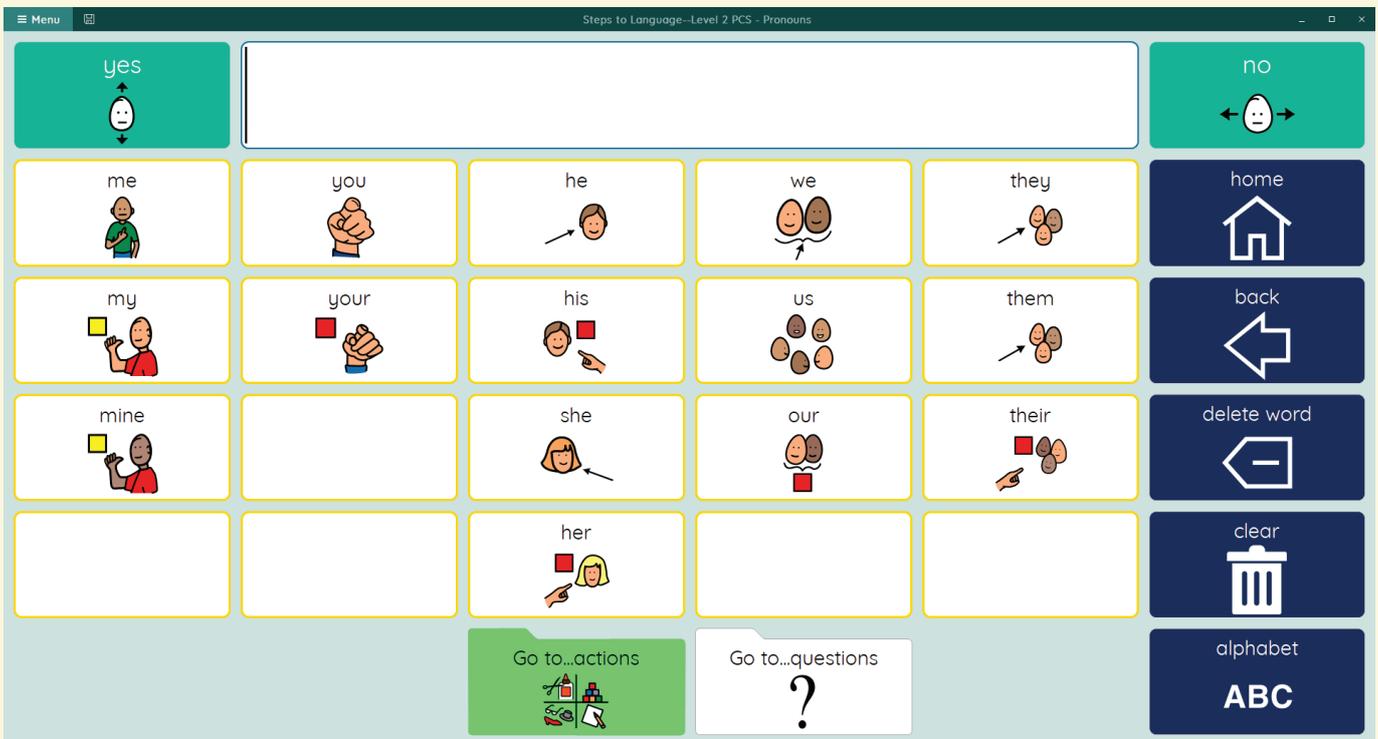
- ✓ Navigating confidently between folders
- ✓ Joining 2-3 symbols together to make messages
- ✓ Using the operational functions to speak, clear and edit their messages
- ✓ Meeting the three aims for stage 2

As before, you may want to introduce the next stage gradually, using both stages for different activities until the child is fully ready to transition to stage 3. You might start by exploring the new core words at stage 3 and using the topic folders so that the child becomes familiar with the increase in vocabulary and some of the new folders.

Introducing grammar elements

At Stage 2, some simple elements of grammar are introduced: Pronouns and Prepositions.

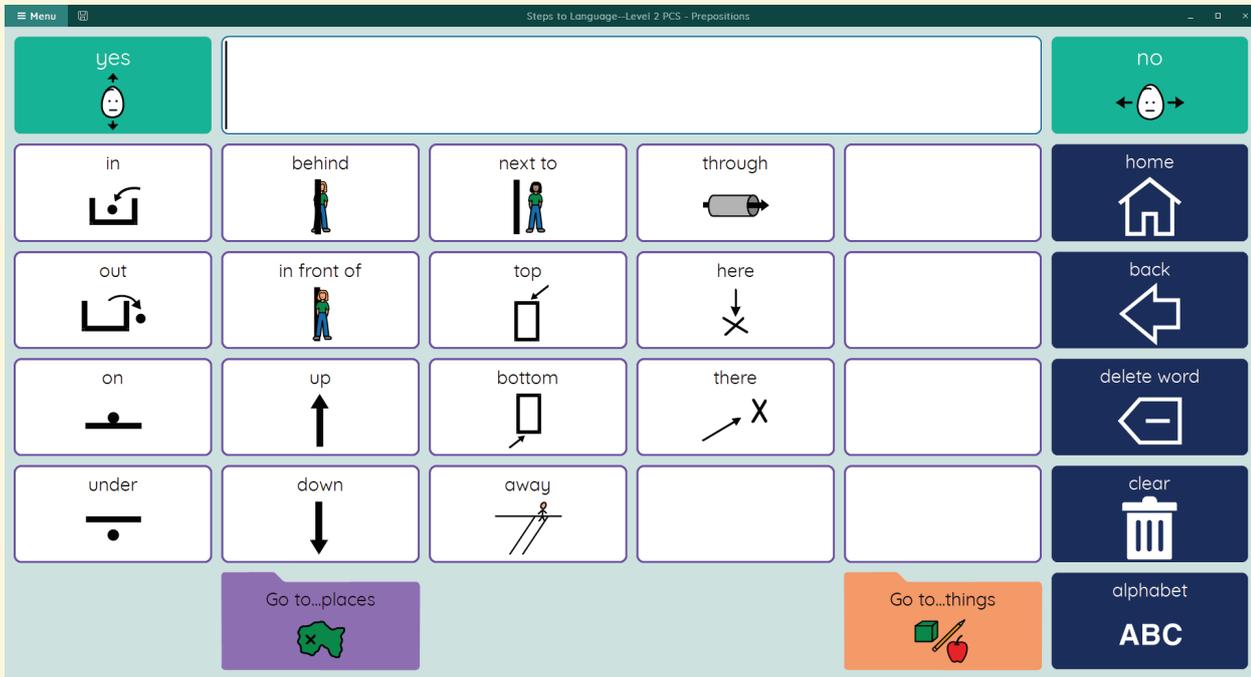
You will find a **Pronouns** folder within the People folder. Pronouns are words that are used to refer to people, including ourselves. They include words such as I, you, he, they, us, etc.



Pronouns can be difficult to teach. Try to model using them in daily activities. You may want to focus on one set of pronouns at a time e.g. me and you, or he and she. For example, you might talk about other children in the classroom, discussing the pronouns you would use - who is a 'he' and who is a 'she'? There are lots of commercially available resources and apps that could be used alongside the Pronouns folder to support the child's understanding and use of these words.

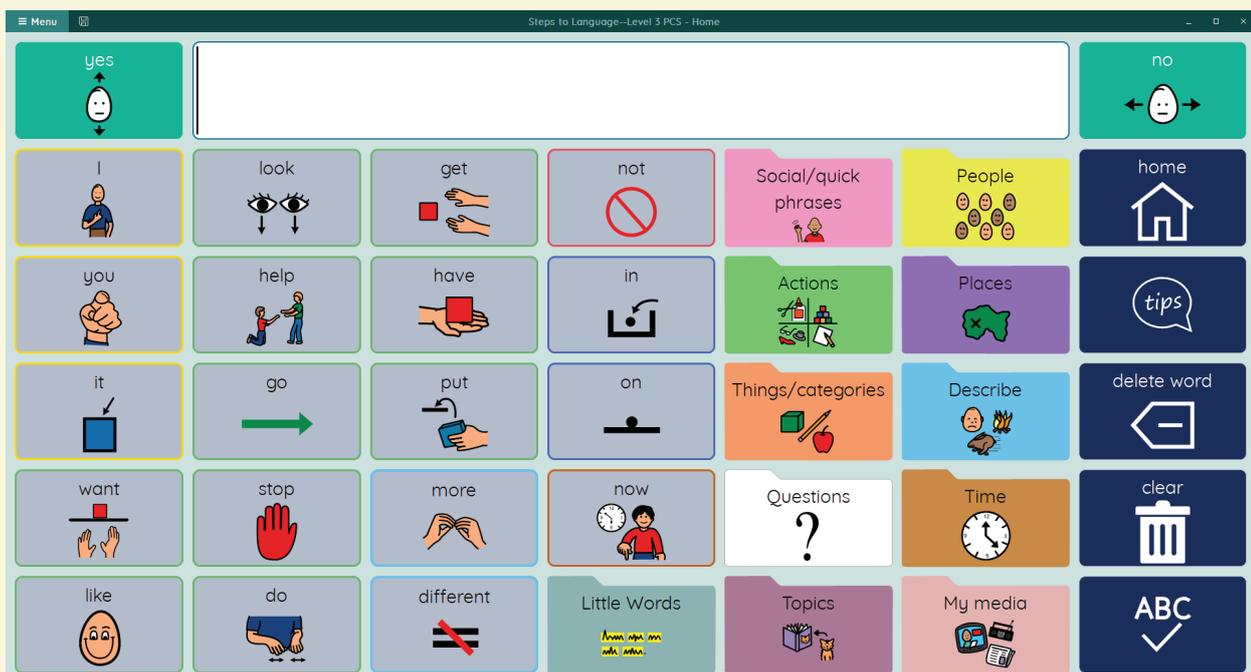
You will find a **Prepositions** folder within the Places folder. Prepositions are words that we use to talk about placement or positioning. They include words such as in, behind, up, down, under, etc.

Prepositions are very visual so can be taught quite simply by talking about things around you e.g. "Oh look, the book is under the table!" You can also use the words in fun activities such as Hide and Seek or scavenger hunts.



As before, you might want to focus on one or two prepositions at a time to ensure that the child's understanding and use of each word is consolidated before moving on to the next.

Steps to Language - Stage Three

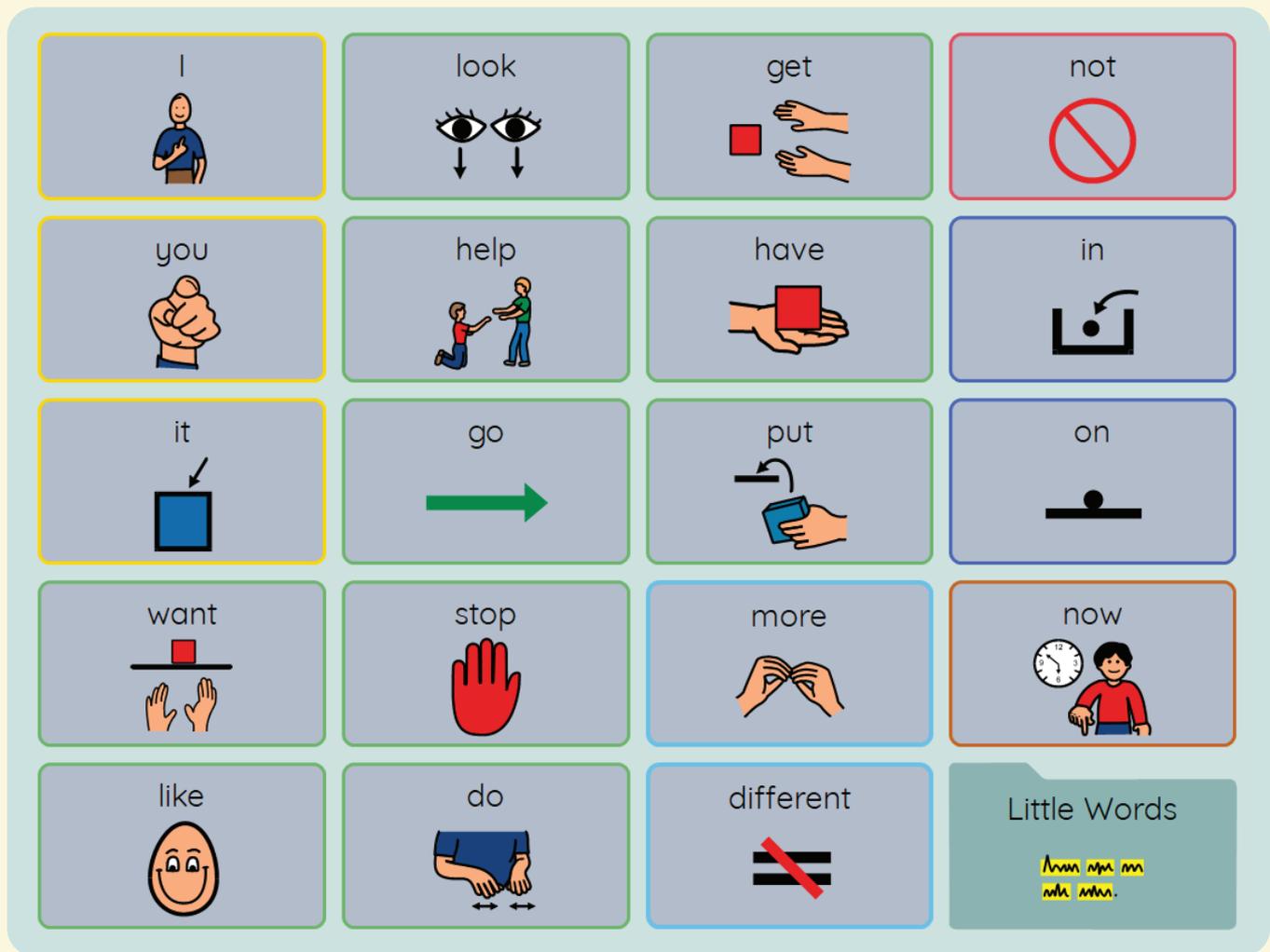


Stage 3 is a comprehensive vocabulary set that maintains the simple navigation format of the previous 2 stages while using subcategories to provide an extensive vocabulary. The screen layout has 11 folders on the right side of the screen and 20 core vocabulary words on the left.

The new features at this stage include:

- ✔ 5 new core words
- ✔ A new folder- 'Little Words'. This folder contains the grammatical elements needed for constructing a sentence, including conjunctions and words related to time
- ✔ Many more subcategories. Each folder has subcategories to make it easier to find specific words e.g. within 'Actions', the action words are sorted by functions including 'Daily routine actions' and 'Hobby actions'
- ✔ New topics reflect the development of the child or young person. You will find folders for 'Science and Nature', 'Going Out', 'Celebrations' and 'My weekend'. There are a number of blank topic grids that may be used for school lessons or activities that the child frequently takes part in
- ✔ The guided selection feature has been removed at this stage as the child or young person should now be confident in moving between folders due to the similar layout of Stages 1 and 2

The Core Words at Stage 3 include:



At Stage 3, there are 3 new aims for the child or young person:

1. To repair mistakes in messages and breakdowns in communication

Everyone occasionally makes mistakes when communicating. We might use the wrong word or forget what we were going to say. This is no different for an AAC user which is why it's so important to support the child or young person to repair communication breakdowns. We can do this by modelling use of quick phrases and use of operational functions.

Within the 'Social/Quick phrases' folder, there are a number of phrases designed to help with this such as, 'I made a mistake', 'Wait a minute' and 'Let me show you'.

The child or young person should now be familiar with the operational functions introduced at Stages 1 and 2 such as deleting single words, clearing the message bar and using the message bar to speak full messages. At this level, they should begin to use these features to repair breakdowns in communication or to modify their messages.

2. To use the ‘Little Words’ folder to develop grammatical sentence structures

At Stage 1 and 2, the focus is on the content of the message rather than structure or grammar. This is so that phrases can be modelled that match the language level of the child. Grammatical elements were gradually added at level 2 with the addition of ‘Pronoun’ and ‘Preposition’ folders. At level 3, the ‘Little Words’ folder introduces many more elements of grammar. Some of these are also found within the People, Place, Describe and Time folders.

Children often need to be explicitly taught how to use words such as conjunctions (joining words like because, but and so) or quantity words (concept words such as all, some and none)

3. To be able to construct a sentence that includes 3-4 elements e.g. People + Action + Thing, Time + People + Action + Describe, etc.

The layout of Steps to Language considers methods that Speech and Language Therapists use to support children to construct sentences. One of these methods is Colourful Semantics (Bryan, 1997). Within this method, a child begins by constructing simple sentences with 2 elements such as a Person + an Action (e.g. “I run”, “Mum sing”). However, as their vocabulary develops, more elements are added. (concept words such as all, some and none)

By Stage 3, the child or young person should be quite familiar with making short messages with 2 elements. They should now be encouraged to expand on their message, adding more elements.

Example of sentence structures include:

<i>Social</i>	<i>People</i>	<i>Question</i>	<i>Thing</i>
Hi	Dad	Where's (the)	remote?
<i>Core/People</i>	<i>Actions</i>	<i>Thing</i>	<i>Time</i>
I	made	(a) cake	yesterday

Ask the child or young person questions to encourage them to expand on their message e.g. If they said "I went (to the) cinema" you could ask, "When?"

At Stage 3, there are 2 aims for the adult supporting the child:

1. Model use of grammar with particular reference to the 'Little Words' folder
2. Reduce direct prompts in daily conversations

Introducing word endings

Introducing word endings (The ABC tab)

At level 3, more elements of grammar are introduced including word endings. The word endings pop up when you select the ABC tab. This suggests a number of ways that you can modify the word you have just selected. The word endings you will find include:

✓ Regular past tense (-ed)

This can be used to indicate that something has happened e.g. waited, listened, fell, bought, etc.

✓ Present tense (-ing)

This can be used to indicate that something is currently happening e.g. sitting, listening, carrying, etc.

✓ Plurals

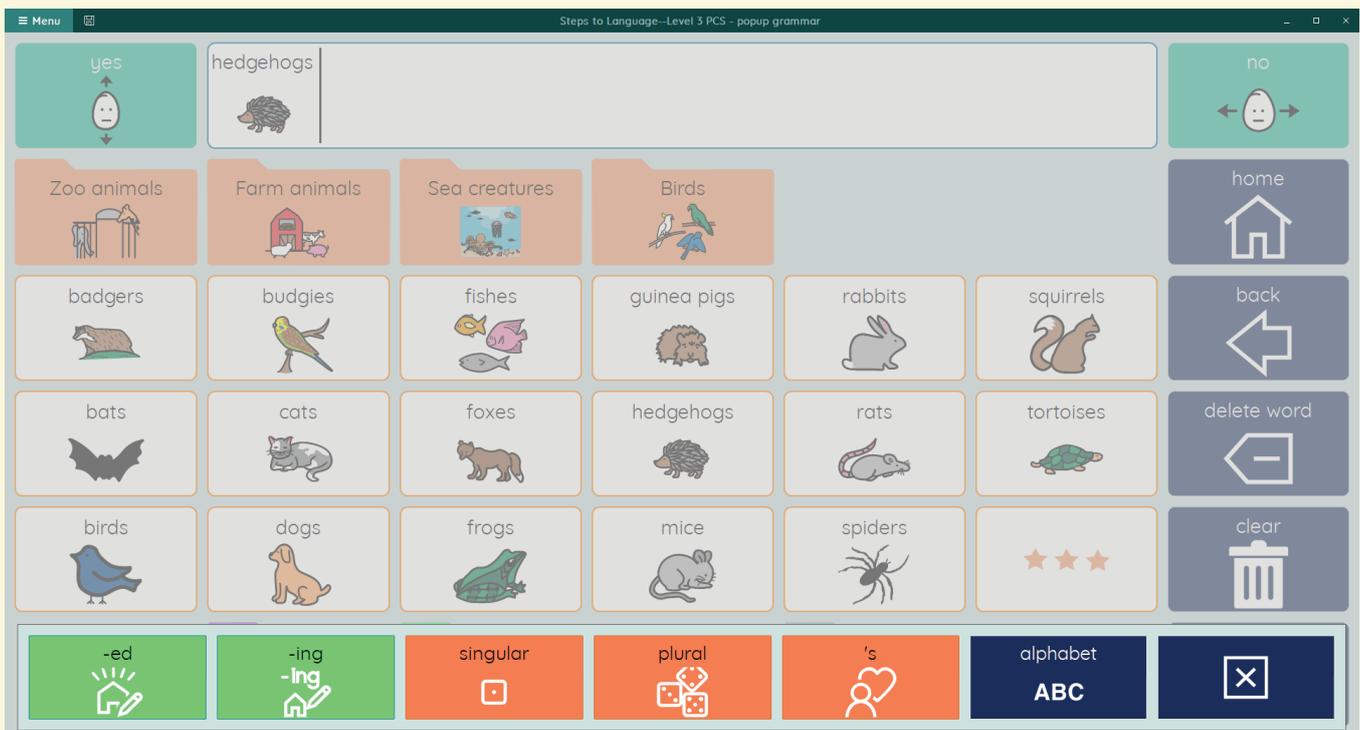
This can be used to indicate that there is more than one of something e.g. friends, car, dogs, etc.

✓ Singular

This can be used if you have changed a word to a plural and wish to change it back to indicate that there is just one item e.g. dog as opposed to dogs

✓ Possessive –s

This can be used to indicate that something belongs to someone e.g. the girl's coat, Dad's book, the teacher's car, etc.



When a word ending is selected, all the written labels will change to reflect the selection. For example, if you are on the animal page and select 'plurals' all the written words will demonstrate this by adding the –s (birds, dogs, rabbits, rats, etc). You can reset this by selecting the large 'X' on the ABC tab.

If the child selects a word ending that does not fit with the selected word, the word will remain unchanged e.g. if the child selects 'hedgehog' and then

present tense, the word will remain as ‘hedgehog’ as it is a noun and does not require a tense.

Word endings often need to be explicitly taught as they are complex elements of grammar. You may want to start with one element at a time and tie this in with what the child is learning in literacy lessons.

Developing Literacy Skills

Developing literacy skills can be difficult for children who use AAC as they have fewer opportunities to play with sounds. Stages 1 and 2 of Steps to Language aim to address this difficulty by using phonetic keyboards. When the child selects a letter, they will hear the sound that the letter makes. This allows them to explore putting sequences of sounds together. This is a very important phase in learning to both read and spell. The predictive text element in Steps to Language also shows the child how the letters that they select can form words.

At stage 1, encourage your child to use the keyboard to play with sounds and explore selecting the words in the predictive text bar. During literacy lessons, ensure your child can access their keyboard and highlight target sounds for them so that they can find them on their keyboard.

At stage 2, your child may begin to identify the onset of a word (the first few letters) and then select the appropriate word from the predictive text tab. This is a quicker method than typing each letter individually. If your child cannot find a word in their AAC system, encourage them to use their keyboard page and sound out the word together.

At stage 3, the child’s literacy skills should be more established. The keyboard is no longer phonetic but instead speaks the letter name.

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