



Focused: school children get to grips with making a stop-motion animation using HUE Animation Studio, which is said to be excellent for encouraging communication

# Board the expression express

**From using special apps to a way of teaching questioning skills, Fiona McNeill looks at equipment and strategies that can help individuals with autism to manage a range of communication issues**

Difficulty with communication is one of the hallmarks of autism, no matter where a person sits on the spectrum. Fortunately, there are strategies, games and even ingenious gadgets to help people express themselves more easily and connect with the world around them.

## Pyramid Educational Consultants

Many readers will have heard of 'PECS', the Picture Exchange Communication System.

Developed by Andy Bondy and Lori Frost in the USA in 1985, it's a method of using pictures to help people with autism or learning disabilities to communicate. It was devised using cards and books, but these days is also available as an app.

The system has six levels. Starting out, children learn to associate a card with an object – a picture of an orange with an actual orange, for example – and then to give the card to a parent or teacher in order to be given the real thing. As they progress, they come to associate many other pictures with objects. Eventually, they learn to express themselves with, for example, 'I want', 'I see', and 'I hear' and form sentences.

Pyramid trains parents, teachers and professionals to use PECS. Andy Yates, a consultant with the organisation and a former primary school teacher, says the system has the potential to help most

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repetitive movement is the use of the touchscreen. Because the buttons for particular words are always in the same place on the screen, say the experts, the user comes to associate the pressing action with the word, thus 'cementing' the learning.

Emily Gabrielle, education and resources consultant with Liberator, says it's important for parents and teachers to follow the child's interests when using the device so that the learning isn't passive.

"I'm passionate about LAMP," she says. "Sometimes, people move on to full speech, but the most joyous stories I hear are the things people learn about their children. They say things like, 'I never knew my son hated wearing orange', or 'I didn't know my daughter preferred strawberry ice-cream.'"

Liberator has consultants across the UK and Ireland who meet families to discuss suitable options. The company offers a two-week free trial of any device, and there are links to funding bodies on the firm's website. One of its most popular devices, the Accent 800, sells for £3,995 plus VAT.

[www.liberator.co.uk](http://www.liberator.co.uk)

#### HUE

HUE sells funky, flexible cameras that plug into a computer, allowing parents, teachers and kids of all abilities to make films or give presentations. However, one of the firm's products – the HUE Animation Studio – has proved to be a big hit with children on the autistic spectrum.

HUE Animation Studio is a kit – consisting of a camera with a microphone, software and a colourful book of ideas – enabling people to make stop-motion animations. As fans of *Wallace and Gromit* or *Morph* will know, this technique involves filming an object frame by frame, moving it very slightly each time so that it appears to move.

"It's a fantastic tool for encouraging communication," says Cathy Doel, HUE's marketing manager. "There are so many roles involved in making an animation – using your imagination to create a story, making the models, doing the lighting, adding a soundtrack. >>

**“We had one child who went through all six levels in two and-a-half hours”**

people. "We had one child who went through all six levels in two and-a-half hours, but other people have taken years," he says. "It depends on the learner and their skills. Most people make progress."

PECS has also helped many students develop speech, Yates says, and it can help reduce challenging behaviour by giving people a better way of expressing themselves. "We never make promises," he says, "but PECS is a wonderful way of unlocking someone's potential."

[www.pecs-unitedkingdom.com](http://www.pecs-unitedkingdom.com)

#### Liberator

Liberator offers a range of high-tech AAC (Augmented and Assistive Communication) products to help people with physical and mental disabilities and impairments, including autism, to communicate. This includes interactive devices that allow

Technology for talking: a girl uses a Liberator AAC device, which allows users to 'speak' by touching 'buttons' displayed on a screen

**“The most joyous stories I hear are the things people learn about their children. They say things like, 'I never knew my son hated wearing orange'”**

people to 'speak' via word 'buttons' displayed on a screen. When the button is pressed, it generates the sound of someone saying that word. Users can eventually combine words to create phrases and sentences.

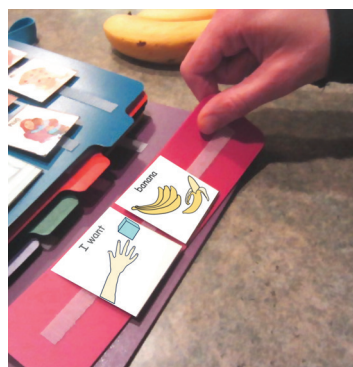
Underlying the design of these gadgets is a therapeutic approach known as 'LAMP' – Language Acquisition through Motor Planning – which was developed in the USA.

One of the main principles of LAMP is that learning language is connected to repetitive muscle movements. In a neurotypical person, this would be moving the mouth and throat to create sounds, but where a person is non-verbal or has limited speech, the

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## Communication

**“A teacher working with kids with autism and severe learning difficulties told us she was astonished to see how well her students co-operated with each other”**

It's a great way to get kids to collaborate, though it's also possible for them to make something by themselves. There are other cameras out there,” she adds, “but the unique, bendy design of our products makes the process so much easier.”

Because stop-motion requires precision, it helps to encourage dexterity, Doel points out, while the visual nature of the activity and the intense concentration required play to autistic people's strengths.

Added to which, she says, animation can be used by teachers to supplement almost any classroom activity – illustrating a historical event, for example, or showing how fractions work. With the huge increase in home-schooling, the kit could also benefit families following that route. “We've had great feedback,” Doel says. “One lady, a teacher working with kids with autism and severe learning difficulties, told us she was astonished to see how well her students co-operated with each other.”

HUE Animation Studio retails for £41.63 plus VAT. It's available from the company's website or Amazon. [www.huehd.com](http://www.huehd.com)

### LVS Hassocks and LVS Oxford

LVS runs specialist schools for children aged 11 to 19 who are not severely impacted by autism. There are schools in Hassocks, West Sussex, and Oxford.

Sarah Sherwood, SEN director with the organisation, says that because her students are at the more able end of the autistic spectrum their communication difficulties are often around



**Copy me do: a girl uses the Speech Blubs app on a mobile phone. Children watch videos of other children and copy them to boost their speech skills**

understanding language in different contexts.

“For example, the word ‘saw’ is fairly common, but it can be a noun or a verb,” she explains. “We use colour-coding to help students recognise the difference.”

Another challenge often faced by students, she points out, is compartmentalising language. This means they might learn to use certain words and phrases in a school setting but never use them at home, even though they might be useful there, too.

Because of this, staff work on encouraging a more flexible approach. An example of this is teaching them the following three-point formula for finding out information:

1. Say ‘Excuse me’
2. Ask your question
3. Say ‘Thank you’.

**“What’s really important is that the school forms a close relationship with the parents. If they know what we’re doing in the classroom, they can reinforce it at home”**

Teachers emphasise that students can also apply this strategy at home and in the outside world – asking someone for directions, say, or finding out what mum or dad is making for dinner. “Some children will take these methods on board quicker than

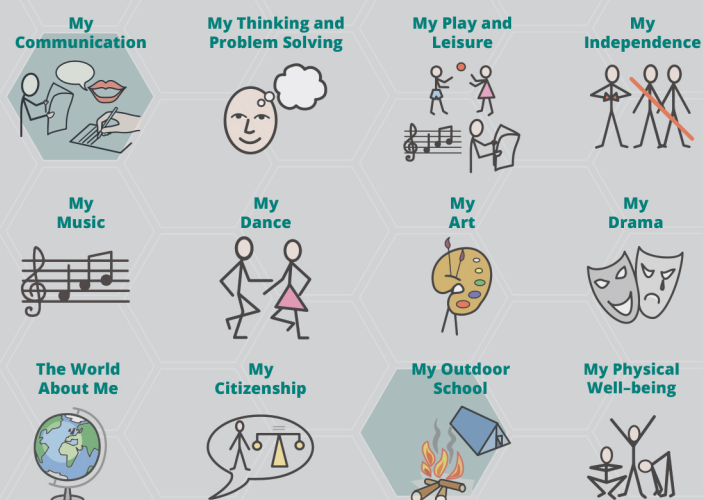


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### The general principles governing the schemes of work are that they

- are developmental in nature and open to personalisation - they start at the beginning of the individual pupil's learning journey and aim for the highest level of independence possible
- cover all stages of education from 2 to 25 (and beyond) but are not directly related to either age or key stage. Learners fit into them where they will according to their individual abilities, interests and learning journey
- are not related to the National Curriculum, though the common language of the P Scales is occasionally used for ease of understanding.



## “Children prefer to imitate peers rather than adults”

others,” Sherwood admits, “but what’s really important is that the school forms a close relationship with the parents. If they know what we’re doing in the classroom, they can reinforce it at home.”

[www.lvs-hassocks.org.uk](http://www.lvs-hassocks.org.uk)

[www.lvs-oxford.org.uk](http://www.lvs-oxford.org.uk)

### Speech Blubs

Speech Blubs is an app designed to encourage speech in children with ASD, learning disabilities or other communication issues.

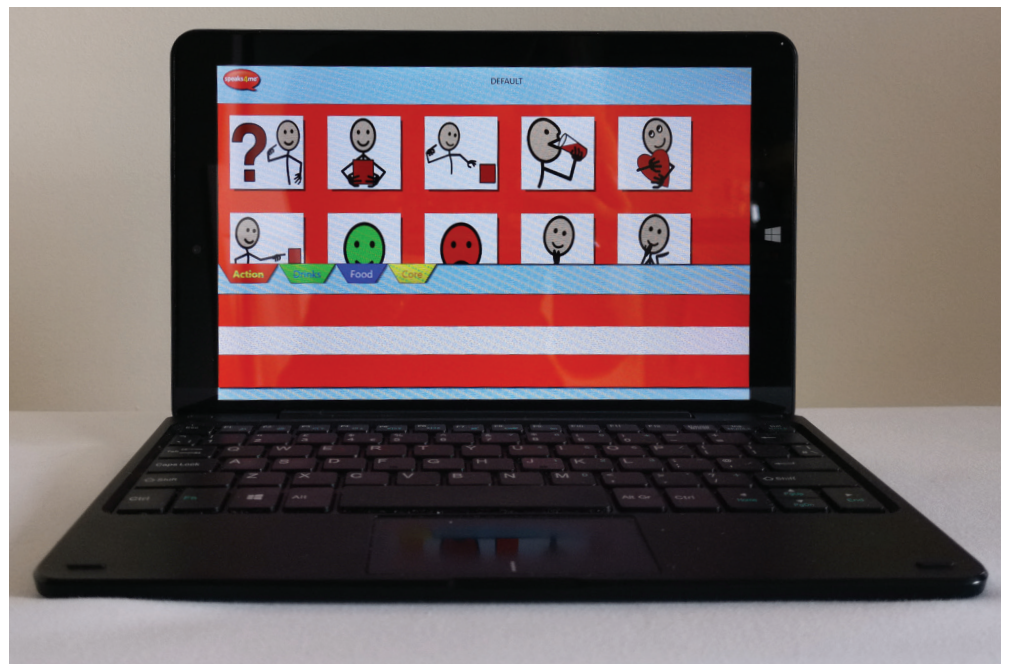
It was developed in Slovenia by four friends who had all had speech difficulties as children but hadn’t enjoyed the therapy they’d received. The aim, therefore, was to make Speech Blubs fun and interactive. Users watch videos of children making sounds, saying words and sentences and even singing and then copy what they do – with the added bonus of face filters and stickers.

“It has been proven that children prefer to imitate their peers rather than adults,” says Mitja Mavsar, one of the co-founders of the company. Parents start with a thorough questionnaire where we ask them all kinds of questions about their child and get a really good idea about the areas which need most attention.

“One area that children with autism often struggle with is expressing and recognizing emotions,” he continues. “Speech Blubs also has a section specifically made for that. It teaches children about different emotions, how to recognize them (connect them with certain facial expressions) and in the same way also how to express emotions better.”

Speech Blubs is now available in the UK on Apple and Android. Though it is aimed at children aged 2 to 7, it can be used by older children or even adults if required. There is a seven-day free trial, after which it costs \$9.99 (about £8) per month.

[www.speechblubs.com](http://www.speechblubs.com)



### Speaks4me

Steve Lodge’s son Callum has autism and is non-verbal. Callum was using PECS to communicate (see description on page 27) and getting on well with it, but developed a habit of chewing the cards. This meant he was getting frustrated when the destroyed cards were unavailable, while dad was fed-up with constantly printing new ones.

Seeking something more durable and tailored to his son’s needs, computer expert Steve invented Speaks4me, a software program designed to be used on tablets. As with other communication aids, the screen displays buttons showing different images. When these are pressed, they make the sound of the associated word. It proved so successful with Callum that Steve formed a company and now sells the product to families and special needs schools.

“What’s unique about this product is the drag-and-drop feature,” says Andy Yardley, sales director with the organisation. “Some people may not be able to connect pressing a button with creating a sound. But if they drag a symbol and drop it in the speech bar, it’s much easier for them to see cause and effect.”

The software can be personalised with photos and users have a choice of three symbol

‘languages’ – SymbolStix, Widgit or Mayer Johnson PCS (Picture Communication Symbols). At present, Speaks4me works with Windows 10, but the company intends to make it compatible with iPad and Android devices too.

“One special needs teacher told us how all her students had been underachieving,” Yardley says. “But after using Speaks4me, every single one of them had increased

**Effective: the Speaks4me system uses a drag-and-drop facility to help boost communication, and has achieved solid results in a classroom**

## “What’s unique about this product is the drag-and-drop feature ... it’s much easier for them to see cause and effect”

their attainment, right across the board. There was a 30 to 37 per cent improvement.”

Speaks4me is available for a 30-day free trial, after which the program is £350 to buy. The program is also available pre-installed on an eight-inch touchscreen Windows tablet for £599, or on a 10-inch tablet for £699. Both tablet prices include a three-year warranty, insurance and a case.

[www.speaks4me.eu](http://www.speaks4me.eu)

