A Parent's Guide to Teaching Minspeak

by Gail M. Van Tatenhove, PA, MS, CCC-SLP
Speech-Language Therapist

Teaching your child to communicate using an AAC device with Minspeak can be a fun family adventure. It can be done during everyday activities, as part of your normal routine. Or it can be done during special "sit-down" learning times. The important thing to be doing, as a parent, is talking with your child and encouraging him/her to talk with you using the Minspeak device.

This guide presents some simple ideas for supporting your child's learning to talk with the vocabulary in the Minspeak-based device. It does not address positioning, access issues or special sensory issues, such as vision or hearing difficulties. It assumes that your child is appropriately positioned, can adequately access the keys on the device, can see the pictures, and can hear the speech output. If not, work with your child's intervention team to address these critical issues.

1. Get hands-on experiences with the objects, people, and actions represented on the main Minspeak overlay.

Children with disabilities do not have the same kinds or amounts of life experiences as speaking, able-bodied children. There may be big gaps in their understanding of what we consider the most simple things. For example, children who eat pureed foods don't always know what the food looks like in a natural form.

❑ Give your child a real-life hands on experience with objects represented on the main Minspeak overlay. For example, use an apple – smell it, touch it, taste it, feel it, etc. The richer the experience, the easier it will be to use the picture on the Minspeak overlay.

❑ Collect "storable" versions of the objects, like props, for each of the main pictures. They don't have to be exactly the same, but represent a similar idea. For example, get some kind of athletic shoe for the high-top shoe on the Unity128 overlay; get a map of your state or town for the treasure map from Unity128. Store them in a box and use them to teach your child about the objects.

❏ Emphasize that each of these things has a PICTURE on the main Minspeak overlay. Find the picture on the overlay. Compare and contrast the picture with the real object.

❏ Talk about the First Rule of Minspeak: **Minspeak uses Pictures**. These pictures are going to speak for your child. Just like other children use their voices to speak, your child uses pictures. Sometimes these pictures are called "Icons," but they are just pictures.

2. Learn about the pictures and the family of ideas that each picture codes.

In Minspeak, each picture means more than one thing - they have "multiple meanings," like multiple personalities. These multiple meanings are logical, if you have had normal life experiences. For example, the apple codes the idea of "eat," "food," "hungry," and "yum." These ideas are related, like members of an **Idea Family**. But it also codes the word "without," which doesn't seem to be a member of the family of ideas. It is included in the family for a reason that needs to be explained (e.g., you always want an apple WITHOUT a worm in it and WITHOUT bruises).

As you review the different words, you are going to have to go back in your memory to your schools days…….
- A noun is the name of a person , place, or thing.
- An adjective tells you more about a noun. It describes a noun.
- A verb is an action word. If you can do it, it is a verb.
- An adverb tells you more about a verb. It describes a verb.
- Conjunctions join two words, phrases, or sentences together.
- Prepositions tells us where things are located.
- Determiners point out things without using their names.
- Pronouns replace the proper name of a person or group of people.

❏ Make up your own story about each picture. Start by looking up the key ideas that each picture codes. Look at the main verb, noun, adjective, adverb, preposition, determiner, question word, conjunction, and interjection. In the manual for the vocabulary program, there are "rationales" written for the codes. Use these rationales, if appropriate, as part of your stories. The more personalized the story for your family, the easier it will be for your child to remember the story and, in turn, relate to the vocabulary codes.

One example of a story is as follows: APPLE story = One day, there was a little girl named (name of child using Minspeak). She liked to eat apples. Everyday, she would get hungry and yell out "I am hungry. I want to eat an apple. A yummy, red apple!" Her mother would get an apple and give (name) a bite. "YUM," they would yell as they were eating the apple. But one day, the mom accidentally gave (name) a bad apple. It had a worm in it. Oh no! The little girl said, "I want to eat an apple without a worm. NO WORMS FOR ME!" So, now everyday when the mom gets an apple for (name), they check that they have an apple to eat without a worm in it. The End.

❑ Make a simple audio tape of your story for each picture. Talk about the stories or listen to the audiotape as you are driving, playing around the house, or taking a bath.

❑ Sing songs about the picture families. Make up silly songs using the key words that the picture codes. The book "Singing To Talking With Minspeak" has songs for Parts of Speech and Icon Families. (See www.vantatenhove.com)

One example of a made-up silly song is as follows: APPLE Jingle, sung to the tune of "Are You Sleeping?"

I am hungry, I am hungry. (rubbing tummy)
Give me food! Food to eat! (pointing to mouth)
Meat and grain and dairy;
Pasta, fruit and veggies.
Bite and chew. Bite and chew.

❑ Talk about the Second Rule of Minspeak: **Pictures Mean More Than One Thing.**

3. Learn about the pictures that represent specific parts of speech.

Parts of speech and understanding language based on its part of speech is not taught to children until they have spent at least 5 to 7 years of their lives already talking fluently. They talk without ever thinking about a word being a verb, or adverb, or conjunction. But a child talking with some of the Minspeak programs needs to know something about parts of speech in order to learn the codes and how to communicate.

Learning about parts of speech shouldn't be dull and tedious like a boring English class lesson. And it shouldn't be "too hard" for even a young child to grasp some of the simplest word groups. Learning about word groups, by part of speech, should be fun and creative. One way to make the parts of speech come alive is to "humanize" them. It also makes learning about parts of speech possible for young children.

❑ Create characters for each part of speech, including simple costumes that members of your family can wear. The following characters are favorites of both children and adults with disabilities:
  • Verb – Mr. Action Man, known to his friends as Herb Verb. He wears a tool belt, hat, and carries a bucket.
  • Noun – Grandma Hubbard, who keeps things in the cupboards. She is dressed like a grandmother and carries around 3 shoe boxes (strung together) into which she puts things.
  • Adjectives – The Painter (known to his friends as Art Tist). He wears an artist hat and carries around 3 different sizes of paint brushes. He likes to paint descriptive pictures with water on blackboards, or paint on paper, or use chalk on side walks.
  • Adverb – The Pilot . He is the brother of Mr. Action Man. He is known to his friends as Ed Verb or Al Verb.   He carries about triangular banners with adverbs written on them and is dressed like an airplane pilot. He likes to tell Herb and Art what to do (like "go now," "eat again," "very fast," etc.
  • Interjection – Interjector Joe. He's a very excitable character with a megaphone, yelling out single words, like "hello," "yum," "sorry," etc.
  • Determiner – The Determinator (like the Terminator). He wears a pointed hat and has a wand or laser pointer used to point out or zap things.
  • Conjunction – Connie Junction. She is always joining things together and/or matching things. She likes to dress like a train engineer.
  • Preposition – Bob the Builder, based on the US television show. He tells people where to put things (e.g., in, on, over, under) and likes to do building activities with a toy bridge set.
  • Question Word – The Riddler , from the Batman movie series. He is dressed in a shirt with question marks on it. He always asks questions, like "who," "what," "when," "where," and "why."

❑ Talk about what each character might do with an object, based on his/her part of speech. Use the props you collected for the objects on the Minspeak overlay and act out what each character would do if

he/she was given the object from the Minspeak overlay. Emphasize the key word(s) that are programmed in your Minspeak device. The following chart gives you an example of how this might work.

When given an …	this Character	is going to …
APPLE	Herb Verb	**EAT** it.
APPLE	Grandma Hubbard	put it away in her **FOOD** cupboard.
APPLE	Art Tist	draw a **HUNGRY** person
APPLE	The Pilot	eat it **HUNGRILY**
APPLE	Interjection Joe	yell out **YUM**
APPLE	The Determinator	eat **ALL** the food
APPLE	Bob the Builder	find an apple **WITHOUT** a worm

❑ Make up songs about the Parts of Speech. The book "Singing To Talking With Minspeak" has songs for Parts of Speech and Icon Families. (See www.vantatenhove.com)

One example of a song is as follows: DETERMINER Song, sung to the tune of "Head and Shoulders, Knees and Toes," actions = pointing at something close and far and many things that are close and far.

This and that and these and those
These and those
These and those
This and that and these and those
I can point at what I want.

Each and none and all and some
All and some
All and some
Each and none and all and some
I can point at what I want.

❑ Make a board game with the different characters on it. Use a simple game like "Candyland" as your example. Candyland has colored squares and each of the parts of speech is color-coded, so using this game is a simple strategy. Make up your own rules for playing the game. For example, when you land on a green square, you have to say a "verb." If you land on a yellow square, you have to say a pronoun. Or, have several props available, like the Apple and the Shoe. When you land on a green square, you have to build a phrase

using the verb "eat" or the verb "walk." Make your rules as simple or complicated as your child can follow.

❑ Talk about the Third Rule of Minspeak: **A Picture Talks when it brings along a Friend** (one of the Parts of Speech Characters.)

For example, If we want the APPLE to say "eat," what friend has to come along? - Herb Verb. If you want to eat "all" of it, what friend has to come along with the apple? - The Determinator!

4. Talk with your child using the AAC device.

Parents are models for their children. They learn many different things from their parents and siblings – some which make us happy and others which don't! You can be a model for your child in the use of the AAC device by learning how to talk with the device yourself.

❑ Practice asking your child simple questions with the device and then practice answering the questions yourself. As a starter, teach yourself how to ask these questions and say these answers.

Questions	Answers
How are you?	I am good. I am bad. I am okay.
How do you feel?	I feel good. I feel sick. I feel tired. I am hungry. I am thirsty.
Where are we going?	We are going away. We are going home. We are going back. We are going there. We are going to school.
Why? Why not? How come?	Because I said so. I don't know. Ask your mom. Ask your dad.

❑ Practice using the device to say simple social things, like "hello," "good-bye," "please," "thank you," "you're welcome," and "sorry."

❑ Use a manual communication board version of your child's Minspeak device and use it to talk with your child during simple, daily activities. A product called "Minspeak Activity Scripts" provides scripts and manual boards for 10 different activities. (See www.vantatenhove.com)

❑ Post a wall-chart version of your child's vocabulary and pictures somewhere in a common area of your house. When possible, point to the words and pictures when talking to your child. A commercial product called the Minspeak Natural Language Boards provides a poster-sized chart of 300+ words from Unity128 and Unity84. A manual communication board version of Unity128 in Pathfinder is also available as a free, downloadable product. (See www.vantatenhove.com for these products.)

❑ Practice expanding what your child says. For example, when your child says "eat," expand that by saying, "yes, you are eating." Add more words to what your child just said. Also, add endings on verbs (s, ing, ed). Add endings (er, est) on adjectives. Add the plural ending to nouns. Continue to model language that is slightly longer and more grown-up sounding. Don't require that your child repeat what you just did; however, continue to model the language with the child's Minspeak device or with your manual communication board.

5. Decorate your home with visual reminders.

In many households, we use message boards and "to do" lists to maintain order and help children and spouses remember important events and activities. We all need these kinds of visual reminders in our busy lives. We need the same kind of visual reminders to help our child using an AAC device. Visual reminders help us (1) remember how and when to use the AAC device, (2) maintain consistency and (3) raise expectations.

For example, write the phrase "Help me please" on a card, along with the pictures you need to say that phrase. Post it wherever your child needs help (e.g., in the bathroom, by the bed, in the kitchen, etc.) Ideas on how to make these kinds of materials are provided in the RESOURCES and TUTORIAL sections of this booklet.

Example card*

help	me	please

By having this reminder, the child is reminded that he/she is expected to talk using his/her AAC device. It also shows the codes for the words. The child can use it as a reference, and anyone with basic matching skills is able to act as a coach for the child. You can point to the words and pictures to model for your child, letting them know you expect him/her to use good language to talk to you.

Build up your expectations gradually. Don't try to change all the rules right away. Instead, gradually introduce new ways of talking and interacting in your home.

❑ Look around your house and decide what kinds of things you want your child to say to you. Look for those things that encourage your child to develop independence. Encourage talking that is more than just asking for things. Then make a visual reminder for the items on your list. When your child takes notice and uses the visual reminder, be very animated in your delight. He/She will want to please you again and again.

❑ Put the picture sequence for each family member on that family member's bedroom door.

❑ Engineer your home to make it easier for your child to tell you what he/she wants or wants to do. For example, post a card with the words/pictures for "go outside" on the door, "something to eat" on the refrigerator, "watch tv" by the television, etc. The more that you engineer your home, the more you remind yourself and your child to use the AAC device.

❑ Encourage normal social chatting by trying some of these ideas.
  • A TV watching chart with questions (What's on now?), comments ("That sounds dumb) and requests for action (Turn it up).
  • A list of sentences for telling on a sibling (e.g., I'm going to tell, I saw that, I heard that, you're going to get it).
  • A script for common "after school chatting" (e.g., Mom = What did you do today, Child = nothing).

❑ Don't forget to give your child the opportunity to talk in what some might be consider "impolite" ways. They often enjoy learning and saying these words more than anything else. If your child has siblings, listen to what they are saying, and if appropriate, provide your child with the same language experiences. Let the siblings share the AAC

device and talk with each other. Obviously, you want parental supervision for something like this so it doesn't get out of hand. Maybe do this as a pretend activity so that neither child ends up with hurt feelings. (See the following chart for some ideas.)

Reason for Talking	Examples
Complain	Yuck! I hate that.
Tattle	I'm going to tell mom. I saw that.
Disagree	I don't want to. No way!
Protest	Stop it. Get away from me.
Insult	You're fat. You smell bad.
Correcting / Rebuking	That's not nice. Don't do that again.

RESOURCES

If you want to make materials to help your child learn and use Minspeak, you are going to have to invest some time and maybe a bit of money.   If you are going to spend time making materials, you want to do it as easily and efficiently as possible. If making materials is just not your thing, you can also go out and buy materials, however, they are not always going to be a perfect match for what your child needs.

❑ PRC provides software with every device purchased (as of late summer 2005) for making materials. If you have a device purchased before this time, you'll need to investigate other resources.

❑ The pictures from the Minspeak device are available on a CD. The CD can be used in both PC and Macintosh computers. See www.prentrom.com about purchasing the PRC Picture Set. It is relatively inexpensive ($35.00) and a valuable resource to make materials to help your child. When you have this CD, you don't need any other software to make materials, other than normal software that you might already have on your computer (e.g., Microsoft Word, Excel). You'll have to know how to insert and size pictures to use this CD and how to use the features in your software. For example, you can print out simple sentences with picture sequences on gummed labels or note cards in Microsoft Word but you have to know how to use

Microsoft Word to do this. See the Attachment at the end of this booklet for a simple tutorial.

❑ "Writing with Symbols 2000™" is a PC-based software (NOT Macintosh) produced by Mayer-Johnson Company (www.,mayer-johnson.com) that makes it easy to make materials with text and Picture Communication Symbols (PCS). This software, (cost = $199.00), when you buy it from Mayer-Johnson, does not include Minspeak pictures. However, if you own "Writing with Symbols 2000™," you can purchase "Unity Enhanced for Writing with Symbols 2000™," from Prentke Romich Company for $49.95. It is an addition to the software for making Minspeak materials. As of June 1, 2005, this program is ONLY available for Unity Enhanced (with embellishments ON). However, versions are being developed for Unity Enhanced without embellishments, Unity128 in Pathfinder and Unity84 in Vantage and Vanguard. Check with Prentke Romich Company (1-800-262-1984 or www.prentrom.com) for the cost and availability of these software products.

❑ Developer's Assistant is another PC-only (NOT Macintosh) software program available from Prentke Romich Company (PRC) that can be used for making materials. Again, check with PRC (1-800-262-1984 or www.prentrom.com) for the cost and availability of this software. The current version of Developer's Assistant is ONLY for programs in the Vantage and/or Vanguard. It is not for programs in the Pathfinder.

❑ Gail M. Van Tatenhove, PA is producing an affordable CD (under $50) that will contain icon sticker sheets and templates for making simple materials, such as checker-boards, flashcards, story books, etc. This CD, entitled "Minspeak Materials Made Easy" will be released at the end of 2005. All the materials on this CD are designed to help people make materials without the need for using special computer software. Icon sticker sheets can be printed out and then with a simple "cut & stick" method, you can add pictures to anything you want. The templates can be used to make customized materials for your child. Check Gail's website (www.vantatenhove) for availability of this product.

❑ The Prentke Romich Company website (www.prentrom.com) lists a variety of other authors who produce and sell Minspeak-based therapy materials. Check with these authors to find out what is currently available.

TUTORIAL

Using Microsoft Word with Tables to Make Materials with the PRC Picture CD.

Microsoft Word is a popular software program and is easy to use to make materials using the PRC pictures. By using TABLES in Microsoft Word, you can make a variety of different kinds of materials. This tutorial teaches you to make a simple worksheet using Microsoft Word and pictures from the PRC Picture CD.

Step 1: Learn how to make a Table in Microsoft Word
1. Create a new blank document in Microsoft Word (File Menu– New Blank Document).
2. Save this document as Practice Worksheet.
3. Insert a Table with 4 columns and 2 rows (Table Menu – Insert – Table). It should look like what you see below.

Step 2: Learn how to put TEXT into the Table.
1. Click in the first Table Cells (that is what they are called) and type the word "how."
2. Tab to the next cell in the row (or click in the next cell) and type the phrase "are you"
3. Tab to the next cell in the row (or click in the next cell) and type the word "doing."
4. Tab to the next cell in the row (or click in the next cell) and type the word "today."
5. Center all of your text.

When you are done, it should look like this ….

how	are you	doing	today?

Step 3: Learn how to add more ROWS to your table.
1. Click on the last cell in the table. (Second row – blank cell)
2. Select TAB. A new row should have been automatically created.
3. Click in the cell with the word "how". You need to see your flashing cursor.
4. Go to the TABLE menu and select INSERT – ROW ABOVE. You should now have a new row above the one with the text in it.

It should look like this:

how	are you	doing	today?

Step 4: Experiment with ADDING and DELETING rows.
1. Click on the row where you want to add a row above or below.
2. Click on the row that you want to delete.
3. When you are done, you should be back to a simple 2 row table, like in Step 2.

Step 5: Experiment with ADDING and DELETING Columns
1. Add a new column after the word "today."
   - Click on a cell in the last column.
   - Go to the Table Menu – Insert – Column to the Right.
   - The columns will all squish together to accommodate the new column and fit in your window.
2. Then delete the column you just added. The columns should stay squished together.
3. Spread out the columns to the full width of your window .
   - Click anywhere in the Table.
   - Select TABLE – AUTOFIT – AUTOFIT to WINDOW.

When you are all done adding and deleting, I want you to end up with what you see below. (This same as you started with in Step 2.)

how	are you	doing	today?

Step 6: Change the Borders and Add Shading
The table automatically puts borders around each cell. Highlight all or some of the cells in your table.
1. Select FORMAT – BORDERS & SHADING
2. Make sure the Borders Tab is selected.
3. Experiment with changing the borders.
4. Experiments with adding shading (FORMAT – Borders and Shading, SHADING tab.)

Try to end up with your table looking like the one below.

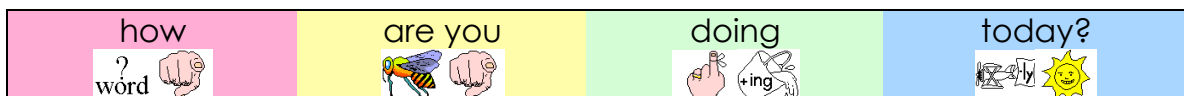| how	are you	doing	today?

Now that you've played with tables, its time to learn how to put in Pictures. Here is where you need to have the PRC Picture CD.

Step 6: Move the PRC Pictures to your Computer.
1. Insert the CD in your computer and find the BMP file on the CD
2. Click the icon of the BMP file.
3. Slide the file onto your computer into a convenient and accessible location. (Suggestion 1: Put it on your desktop, Suggestion 2: Put it in your Microsoft Office or Microsoft Word Program file.)

Step 7: Insert and Size PRC Picture Set Pictures
1. Select the empty table cell under the word "how." If you centered both rows, you should see the cursor flashing under the o in how.
2. From your Menu Bar, select Insert – Picture - From File.
3. Find where you put the BMP folder of the PRC Picture Set.
4. Find the B sub-folder and find the QUESTION2 picture.
5. Format the picture to 30% of its original size. DO NOT USE Edit Picture. Use **FORMAT**.
    a. Do a single RIGHT CLICK on the picture.
    b. Select FORMAT PICTURE.
    c. Click on the SIZE Tab.
    d. Change both the Height and Width to 30%.
6. Add these pictures – Hammer, Bee, You, Remember, Verb+ing, Adverb, Sun. When you are done, it should look like what you see below.

These are the basics of making materials using Tables and the PRC pictures. For more information on using Tables, use the HELP menu of Microsoft Word.

For further information about helping your child communicate using a Minspeak-based device, contact Gail M. Van Tatenhove, PA.

Gail M. Van Tatenhove
8322 Tangelo Tree Drive
Orlando, FL 32836-5437
Email: gvantatenhove@cfl.rr.com

For Therapy Materials and Products, go to www.vantatenhove.com.