

# **Makaton – much more than just signing!**

When someone is having difficulty communicating, it is often very frustrating for everyone involved. When we communicate with others, we need shared experiences, shared vocabulary and a shared method to make the interaction enjoyable.

## **What is Makaton?**

Makaton vocabulary development program is an approach to developing language. The Makaton vocabulary is a core vocabulary of approximately 300 concepts. “Core vocabulary” refers to the vocabulary that everyone uses everyday – the vocabulary that all people share!

If we tried to teach all the words of English (approximately 55, 000 words), it would take forever. The core vocabulary helps us to develop a shared vocabulary so that the frustration of not being able to communicate is decreased.

The core vocabulary is organized into 9 stages of frequently occurring and motivating concepts. Concepts are taught rather than individual words, for example; “food” and “eat” represent the same concept and therefore there is one sign to learn. Concepts can easily be combined to support the development of both understanding and expressive language and speech skills.

## **Isn't Makaton just “key word signing”?**

Makaton is often thought of as “key word signing” but in fact the Makaton vocabulary development program is much more than just signing! Makaton vocabulary development program started in the UK back in the 1970's. At that time, signing was the only technique used when teaching the concepts in the core vocabulary.

In 1985, the Makaton vocabulary development program expanded to include another communication support technique known as symbols. Makaton symbols (black line drawings) were created to accompany the core vocabulary. Other symbol systems have been developed over the years and have become more accessible thanks to the computer age. Picture communication symbols (PCS) are a set of symbols that are very commonly used throughout Townsville.



So Makaton vocabulary development program is not just about signing. Makaton vocabulary development program is a way of developing language and the support techniques that we use to teach the core vocabulary include signing and symbols.

Important point: The Makaton approach to developing language is always accompanied by speech. Signs and/or symbols are used to support what we say. This means that Makaton is a multi-modal approach – we use several modes of communication (speech, sign and symbols) to help children develop language.

**If my child learns the Makaton approach to signing, will he stop talking?**

No. Remember that the Makaton vocabulary development program is not just about signing – it is a multi-modal approach to developing language. When we use the Makaton approach to developing language, we always use speech and we use sign and/or symbols to support what we say. In this way we make the language that we use VISIBLE!

In fact, when Makaton was originally used with adults in the UK, eye contact, attention and socialization increased. Even more exciting was the fact that the Makaton approach also led to increased vocalizations and development of speech!

So will it stop a child from developing speech? NO...it provides a way of communicating when language and speech are slow to develop.

**We are using the Makaton vocabulary development program supported by signs from the core vocabulary but no one else at kindy understands what he is trying to communicate.**

This is not an unusual situation. Most of the signs in the core vocabulary look like what they mean, e.g. phone, plane.



This doesn't mean that everyone will be able to understand the signs. For some children, it is even more complicated because they cannot make the signs as accurately as the adults who teach them. What is most important is that the child's attempts at the sign are consistent...they don't have to be perfect!

When a child is using signing and/or symbols to support the Makaton vocabulary development program, everyone in your child's environment (teachers, doctors, therapists, family) should learn more about the approach. After all, communication is about interacting with the people around us!

## **How can I find out more about attending a Makaton Basic Workshop?**

Makaton Basic Workshops are presented in Townsville throughout the year. Speak with your therapist about booking into an upcoming workshop.

[www.makaton.org](http://www.makaton.org) and [www.newcastle.edu.au/research-centre/special-education/key-word-sign-australia/](http://www.newcastle.edu.au/research-centre/special-education/key-word-sign-australia/)

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