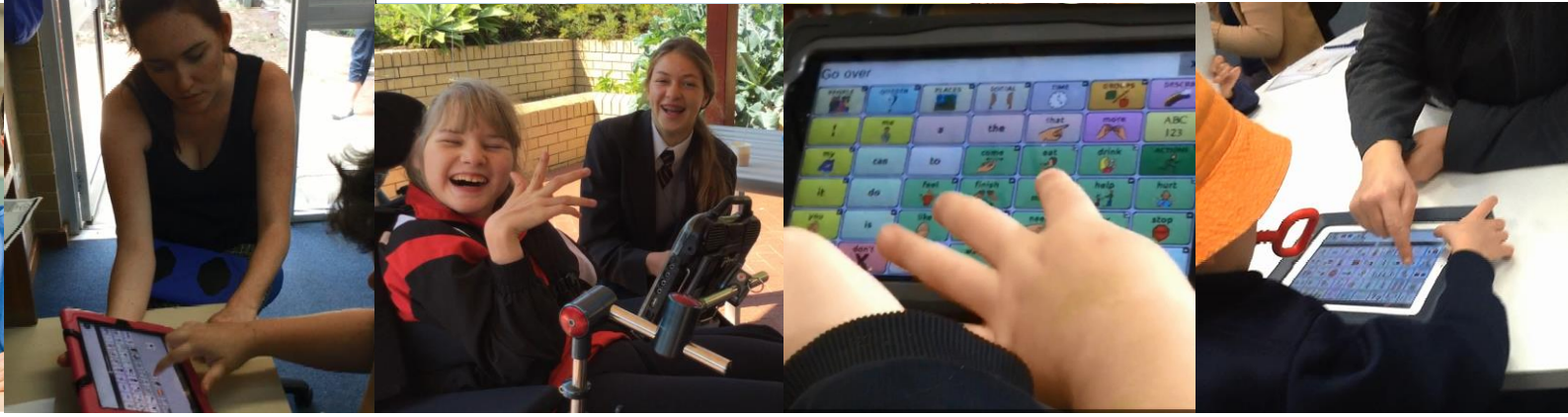

Core Vocabulary and Descriptive Teaching in AAC

Classes typically cover a wide range of topics each year. It can be useful to think about what words will be most useful for our students using AAC, and how we can support them to join in discussion about the varied topics that arise.

What is core vocabulary?

Core vocabulary refers to high frequency, re-usable common words. Approximately 80% of the words we use daily are drawn from a core of fewer than 400 words. These words are relatively consistent across groups of people, activites, places, and topics. Core vocabulary is primarily made up by pronouns, verbs, adjectives and prepositions, with a relative absence of nouns. While many may be considered simple words, they can be combined to communicate more complex sentences. Core vocabulary words overlap a lot with other high frequency word lists used by teachers such as the Dolch list.
Other words which make up the remaining 20% of our messages may be referred to as fringe or content vocabulary. These words, including a high proportion of nouns, vary depending on the topic or activity.

(Van Tatenhove, 2009, Witkowski & Baker, 2012)

Core vocabulary is an important part of an AAC system, and crucial for students learning to combine words into sentences. Most comprehensive communication systems include both core vocabulary and fringe vocabulary.

A number of core vocabulary word lists are available online
http://www.vantatenhove.com/papers.shtml

Want to see the power of core vocabulary?
Watch this video clip for an example of how much can be communicated using only core words
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QqfVAPuGzpI

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What is descriptive teaching?

"Using a descriptive style, the teacher mentions and references the context-specific words, then teaches concepts behind the words using high frequency, re-usable, common words" (Van Tatenhove 2009).

A **referential approach** to teaching is common in many classrooms, with a focus on critical concepts and topic specific vocabulary. Students are encouraged to demonstrate learning by responding using curriculum content words (eg. Herbivore). When working with students using AAC this places a high time demand on staff either programming in new words to a student's device or making extra vocabulary sheets. This approach also means the student is frequently having to learn the location and symbol of many new words, which may be less likely to be used again outside of this classroom topic.

An alternative is to take a **descriptive teaching approach** which has students participate and demonstrate learning using common words to describe (eg. green things), define (eg. eat plants), or predict (eg. not eat me). This approach has a focus on using high frequency, core vocabulary which is already available in a student's comprehensive AAC system. This develops a student's familiarity with navigating to existing vocabulary which will be reusable in a range of contexts, and significantly reduces the programming load for school staff.
We can use a descriptive teaching approach with our students who use AAC by modelling and teaching high frequency core vocabulary available in their device to help explain key concepts, and by asking more open questions when we assess our students' learning.

(Witkowski & Baker, 2012)

Referential Style	Descriptive Style
Need large vocabulary of words rarely needed daily	Need smaller vocabulary of words used daily
Requires least amount of thinking – rote memory	Requires creative thinking re: concepts and vocabulary
Highest memory demand with the least pay off	Focus on info in the lesson, not new pages and symbols

(Van Tatenhove, 2009)

Below are some examples of different class topics with examples of referential style questions, and possible alternative descriptive questions and answers:

A science class are learning about states of matter:

Referential Style (closed)	Descriptive Style (open)
Q. Name 3 states of matter A. solid, liquid, gas	Q. Describe something when it is a solid A. hard, keep shape

A class is going on a bushwalk to learn about native plants and animals:

Referential Style (closed)	Descriptive Style (open)
Q. What animal did we see on the path? A. bandicoot	Q. What can you tell me about the bandicoot? A. Small, brown, soft, long nose, run, go fast

A primary school class has dinosaurs as their theme for the term:

Referential Style (closed)	Descriptive Style (open)
Q. Is the Tyrannosaurus Rex a herbivore, omnivore or carnivore? A. Carnivore	Q. What does the Tyrannosaurus Rex eat? A. eat meat, eat other animals

Planning

When planning for a new classroom topic, we can think about the key concepts we want the students to learn and how these can be described by using higher frequency words they have available in their AAC system.
When teaching, we can both introduce the key concept words, and use and model the associated descriptive language on the student's AAC system.

For example, consider the plan below for an English lesson analysing stories, showing the key content words, and core vocabulary description for two different language levels.

Content Word	Core Vocabulary Description – Emergent Language	Core Vocabulary Description – Advanced Language
Compare	(what is) same	Talk about what is the same between two things
Contrast	(what is) different	Talk about what is different between two things
Author	(he/she) writes	The person who writes the story
Setting	Place (for) story	The place where the story happens
Plot	What (story) about	What the story is about
Character	Person (in story)	The person or people in a story

(Witkowski & Baker, 2012)

You may find it useful to use the format in Appendix A when you are planning a class topic. Identify the key content words or concepts for the topic, see what vocabulary is available in the student's device to describe these concepts, and plan some descriptive style (open) questions you can use when you review the topic.

Want to read more about descriptive teaching?

Gail Van Tatenhove's 'Aided Language Stimulation and the Descriptive Teaching Model' handout
http://www.asha.org/events/convention/handouts/2008/0904_van_tatenhove_gail/

Gail Van Tatenhove's 'Start Talking in Class: Helping Students using AAC Devices' handout
http://www.liberator.net.au/js/fontis/tiny_mce/plugins/filemanager/files/liberator_au/Start%20Talking%20in%20the%20Classroom.PDF

Kate Ahern's blog post on the Descriptive Teaching Model
http://teachinglearnerswithmultipleneeds.blogspot.com.au/2015/09/descriptive-teaching-model-dtm.html

Beyond Calendar Time: AAC Implementation in the Classroom by Janet Lehr
http://www.alabamashaa.org/files/Handouts%202015/Lehr-BeyondCalendarTime.pdf

References

Van Tatenhove, G. (2009). Building Language Competence with Students Using AAC Devices: Six Challenges. *Perspectives on Augmentative and Alternative Communication, 18(2)*, 38-47.

Witkowski, D., & Baker, B. (2012). Addressing the content vocabulary with core: Theory and practice for non-literate or emerging literate students. *Perspectives on Augmentative and Alternative Communication, 21*, 74-81.

This handout was produced with funding received from the Non Government Centre Support For Non School Organisations Of Western Australia

Appendix A
Descriptive teaching – topic plan

Topic: _____

Key content words or concepts	Core word description (Words available in the student's device)

Descriptive style (open) questions to review or assess this topic:

-
-
-
-
-

"Using a descriptive style, the teacher mentions and references the context-specific words, then teaches concepts behind the words using high frequency, re-usable, common words" (Van Tatenhove 2009).

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Vocabulary for Mealtime Placemats to Support AAC Use

Student Name:
Today's Date: _____
Nickname (if applicable) _____
School Student attends _____
Student District of Residence _____

Note: If you don't know an answer, leave it blank!

Name(s) of person/people completing questionnaire	Relationship to student	Date

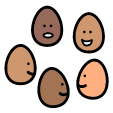
** You may cross out words in the checklists and write in any of your child's unique terms. For example, you may want to cross out the word "dinner" and write in "supper."*

It is likely that we won't be able to fit ALL of the words on a paper board, but we can represent as many as possible!

PEOPLE OFTEN AT THE TABLE

Family Members	What your child calls the person to the left (for example: brother – Billy, mom – Momma) *Leave blank if the same as name on left.*
Mom	
Dad	

PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY!!
If you don't know, leave it blank!!



PEOPLE FREQENTLY DISCUSSED AT THE TABLE

Can include celebrities/favorite professional athletes, etc.

Person's Name	What your child calls the person to the left *Leave blank if the same as name on left.*

VERBS USED AT THE TABLE

bite ☐	burp ☐	chew ☐	clean ☐
clear ☐	drop ☐	cook ☐	cut ☐
drink ☐	hate ☐	eat ☐	finish ☐
like ☐	love ☐	pass ☐	swallow ☐
taste ☐	wash ☐	wipe ☐	drop ☐

PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY!!

If you don't know, leave it blank!!

ADJECTIVES USED AT THE TABLE

bad ☐	best ☐	big ☐	burnt ☐
clean ☐	cold ☐	crispy ☐	crunchy ☐
delicious ☐	dirty ☐	disgusting ☐	done ☐
empty ☐	fast ☐	favorite ☐	good ☐
greasy ☐	gross ☐	hot ☐	juicy ☐
leftover ☐	little ☐	messy ☐	more ☐
plain ☐	raw ☐	salty ☐	silly ☐
slow ☐	smelly ☐	soggy ☐	sticky ☐
sweet ☐	tasty ☐	funny ☐	☐

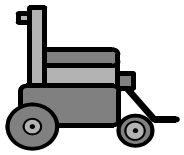
MEALTIME WORDS

breakfast ☐	lunch ☐	snack ☐	dinner ☐
plate ☐	napkin ☐	fork ☐	spoon ☐
cup ☐	bowl ☐	knife ☐	pot ☐
Pan ☐	Sink ☐	dish ☐	dishwasher ☐
Toaster ☐	oven ☐	stove ☐	counter ☐
Table ☐	Chair ☐	Mixer ☐	

MANNERS

Please ☐	Thank you ☐	You're welcome ☐	Thanks ☐
Excuse me ☐	Bless you ☐		

PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY!!
If you don't know, leave it blank!!



POSITIONING/ADAPTIVE EQUIPMENT/PERSONAL CARE:

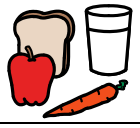
Examples: feeding chair, wheelchair, adaptive spoon, suction plate, change positions, wipe my chin, etc,)

CONDIMENTS

BBQ sauce ☐	blue cheese ☐
honey mustard ☐	hot sauce ☐
ketchup ☐	mayo ☐
mustard ☐	ranch ☐
sour cream ☐	

PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY!!

If you don't know, leave it blank!!



FAVORITE FOODS and DRINKS

Below, please indicate a few favorite topics of conversation at mealtime and associated vocabulary surrounding that topic.

TOPIC 1: Basketball				
People	Verbs	Adjectives	Places	Things
	play	close	Wells Fargo Center	
	shoot			
	foul			

PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY!!

If you don't know, leave it blank!!

TOPIC 2:				
People	Verbs	Adjectives	Places	Things

TOPIC 3:				
People	Verbs	Adjectives	Places	Things

TOPIC 4:				
People	Verbs	Adjectives	Places	Things

PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY!!

If you don't know, leave it blank!!

TOPIC 5:				
People	Verbs	Adjectives	Places	Things

PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY!!
If you don't know, leave it blank!!

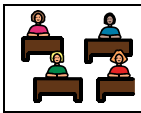
AAC Vocabulary Questionnaire for the Classroom

Student Name: _____ **Today's Date:** _____
Grade Level: _____ **School:** _____

Name(s) of person/people completing questionnaire	Relationship to student	Date

** You may cross out words in the checklists and write in any of the child's unique terms. For example, you could cross out the word "technology" and write in "STEM."*

It is likely that we won't be able to fit ALL of the words on the paper boards constructed; however, we will represent as many key words as possible!
If you frequently use a word, check the box next to that word.
If you don't see a word or phrase you use often, write it in a text box!
Please make sure you highlight any words that are very frequently used & therefore essential for this student



CLASSMATES/BUDDIES NAMES

If you don't know an answer, leave it blank!!

Lauren Enders, MA, CCC-SLP - June 2018

TEACHERS/STAFF NAMES **(please put subject/staff role in parenthesis)**

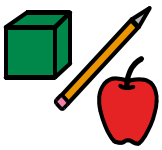
SCHOOL PLACES

art ☐	elevator ☐	Principal's office ☐	
bathroom ☐	hallway ☐	PT room ☐	
auditorium ☐	library ☐	Ramp ☐	
cafeteria ☐	nurse's office ☐	speech room ☐	
classroom ☐	office ☐	stairs ☐	
computer lab ☐	OT room ☐		

VERBS FREQUENTLY USED IN THE CLASSROOM

add ☐	go ☐	need ☐	say ☐
answer ☐	give ☐	pack up ☐	share ☐
bring ☐	help ☐	play ☐	sit ☐
drink ☐	work ☐	put ☐	think ☐
eat ☐	line up ☐	put away ☐	unpack ☐
finish ☐	listen ☐	read ☐	walk ☐
follow ☐	make ☐	ready ☐	write ☐
get ☐	mean ☐		

If you don't know an answer, leave it blank!!

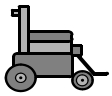


NOUNS FREQUENTLY USED IN THE CLASSROOM

book ☐	folder ☐	assignment book ☐	
paper ☐	worksheet ☐	test ☐	
pencil ☐	chair ☐	quiz ☐	
marker ☐	desk ☐	journal ☐	
pen ☐	table ☐		
eraser ☐	rug/carpet ☐		
ruler ☐	whiteboard ☐		

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF DAILY ROUTINE (e.g., First the kids come off the bus, they come in and greet a peer, then morning meeting, etc.….):

1.	11.
2.	12.
3.	13.
4.	14.
5.	15.
6.	16.
7.	17.
8.	18.
9.	19.
10.	20.



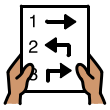
POSITIONING/ADAPTIVE EQUIPMENT/PERSONAL CARE:

Examples: feeding chair, wheelchair, adaptive spoon, suction plate, change positions, wipe my chin, etc,)

If you don't know an answer, leave it blank!!

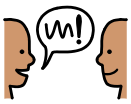
SUBJECTS/TIMES OF DAY

computers/technology ☐	science ☐	
dismissal ☐	social studies ☐	
gym/phys ed.☐	recess ☐	
health ☐	snack ☐	
library ☐		
lunch ☐		
science ☐		



COMMON TEACHER DIRECTIONS/QUESTIONS GIVEN TO STUDENTS (Main question words will be included: who, what, why, when, where, how)

Go to your seat ☐	Quiet ☐	Can you tell me….? ☐
Push in your chair ☐	I like how you're….☐	How do you…? ☐
Read the directions ☐	Line up ☐	Where is your…? ☐
read ☐		
add ☐		
subtract ☐		
multiply ☐		
divide ☐		
Get/take out your…☐		
Put away your…☐		
Walk ☐		



FREQUENTLY USED STUDENT SOCIAL LANGUAGE
(words, phrases, sentences- e.g. "Burn!")

If you don't know an answer, leave it blank!!

FREQUENTLY USED STUDENT ACADEMIC STATEMENTS/QUESTIONS

I know. ☐	Where is… ☐	
I don't know. ☐	Can I…. ☐	
I need help. ☐	Can you help me? ☐	
I'm done ☐	How do I…? ☐	
I'm finished ☐		

COMMON STUDENT DISCUSSION TOPIC 1:				
People	Verbs	Adjectives	Places	Things
Phrases:				

COMMON STUDENT DISCUSSION TOPIC 2:				
People	Verbs	Adjectives	Places	Things
Phrases:				

COMMON STUDENT DISCUSSION TOPIC 3:				
People	Verbs	Adjectives	Places	Things
Phrases:				

COMMON STUDENT DISCUSSION TOPIC 4:				
People	Verbs	Adjectives	Places	Things
Phrases:				

COMMON STUDENT DISCUSSION TOPIC 5:				
People	Verbs	Adjectives	Places	Things
Phrases:				

SCHOOL DAY MAP SURVEY

Purpose: to assist teams in identification of essential vocabulary and communication purposes for students using AAC

Student: _____ Date Completed:_____

Teacher: _____

Time Period	Activity	What words do **you** say to the students?	What words/phrases would you like your student to communicate during this time?
Example: *8:40 - 8:50*	*Get off bus and come into the school building*	• *"Good morning!"* • *"How are you this morning?"*	• *Use a greeting* • *Answer question "How are you this morning?" with an adjective*

Time Period	Activity	What do you say to the students?	What would you like students to communicate during this time?

Vocabulary Questionnaire to Support Vocabulary Selection for Augmentative & Alternative Communication

Student Name: _____ **Date:** _____
Nickname (if applicable) _____ **DOB:** _____
School Student attends _____
Student District of Residence _____
Student home address and phone number (*for emergency information on communication system*) _____
_____
_____

This questionnaire is designed to aid in the selection of the most important and meaningful vocabulary for students using or beginning to use an augmentative and/or alternative communication system (such as a voice output communication device or communication board). The words you choose will help the team develop a communication system that offers more meaningful and power vocabulary.

Note: If you don't know an answer, leave it blank!

Does he/she recognize line-drawn symbols (i.e., Boardmaker) Y N

Does he/she require photographs? Y N

Name of person completing questionnaire	Relationship to student	Date

PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY!!
If you don't know, leave it blank!!

* You may cross out words in the checklists and write in any of the child's unique terms. For example, you may want to cross out the word "dinner" and write in "supper."

List any words that you feel the child *ABSOLUTELY NEEDS* to communicate in order to function in his/her life.	

PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY!!

If you don't know, leave it blank!!

PEOPLE:

FAMILY

Family Members and other people close to child at home (mom, dad, brother, sister, etc.)	What your child calls the family member to the left (for example: brother – Billy, mom – Momma)

Where mom works/what she does: _____

Where dad works/what he does: _____

What I like to do with Mom: _____

_____

_____

PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY!!

If you don't know, leave it blank!!

Enders/McGowan with format and content largely borrowed from questionnaire by Janice Light 5/11

What I like to do with Dad: _____

_____

_____

What I call Mom's parents (Ex.: grandmother –Nana, grandfather-Pops):

_____

What I call Dad's parents (Ex.: grandmother –Nana, grandfather-Pops):

_____

PETS	
Type of Pet	Pet's name

OTHER PEOPLE IMPORTANT TO THE CHILD	
Relation to child (ex. Neighbor)	What your child calls the person to the left (for example: neighbor – Mrs. Smith)

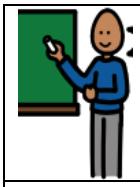
PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY!!

If you don't know, leave it blank!!

Enders/McGowan with format and content largely borrowed from questionnaire by Janice Light 5/11

PROFESSIONALS CHILD ENCOUNTERS FREQUENTLY (outside of school)

Professional	**Name:** What your child calls the person to the left (for example: pediatrician – Dr. Smith)



SCHOOL PEOPLE
Adults the child interacts with in his/her school

School Personnel	What your child calls the person to the left (for example: teacher – Mrs. Smith)

PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY!!
If you don't know, leave it blank!!

Enders/McGowan with format and content largely borrowed from questionnaire by Janice Light 5/11

SCHOOL FRIENDS

Students child interacts with in his/her school environment

PLACES:

SCHOOL PLACES –

Places child goes within and outside of the school building

Place	What child calls place listed on left

PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY!!

If you don't know, leave it blank!!

Where does your child go after school (home, sitter, caretaker, daycare center…):

_____

_____

_____

Who child sees after school (family, friends, care takers, therapists…)

_____

_____

_____

_____

HOME PLACES:

SOME OF CHILD'S FAVORITE PLACES TO GO ARE:

Some of my child's favorite places to go are: (ex. inside, outside, Bobby's house, etc.)

STORES: Which specific stores does the child visit in the community?
(ex. Target, Acme, etc,)

PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY!!

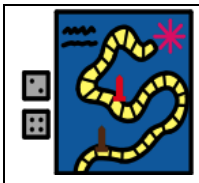
If you don't know, leave it blank!!

RESTAURANTS: Which specific restaurants does the child visit in the community?
(ex. McDonald's, Applebees, etc,)

VACATION SPOTS: Which specific vacation does the child visit?
(ex. beach, Ocean City, Poconos, etc,).

PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY!!
If you don't know, leave it blank!!

HOME ACTIVITIES:

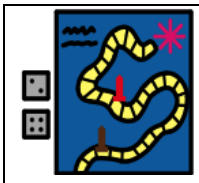


FAVORITE HOME ACTIVITIES: Which specific activities does your child like to play at home? (ex. puzzles, reading, cooking, eating, playing cars and trucks, listening to music, computer, dolls, games, etc.) Please be specific and name toys, games, toy parts, book names, etc. (Use back for additional space)

PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY!!

If you don't know, leave it blank!!

SCHOOL ACTIVITIES:

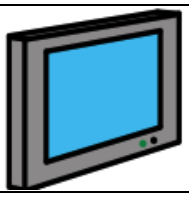


SCHOOL ACTIVITIES: Which specific activities does your child do/enjoy/dislike at school? (ex. puzzles, reading, writing, cooking, eating, cars and trucks, listening to music, computer, games, etc.) Please be specific and name toys, games, toy parts, book names, etc. (Use back for additional space)

FAVORITE MUSIC/ARTISTS: Please name specific music, songs, artists your child enjoys.

PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY!!

If you don't know, leave it blank!!



FAVORITE TV SHOWS/STARS/MOVIES/ DVDS/CDS/CHANNELS: Please name specific music, songs, artists your child enjoys.

Child typically watches TV with the following people:

_____

_____

_____

Where /how the child likes to watch:

_____

_____

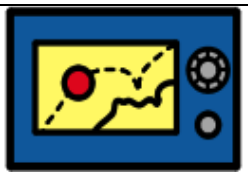
_____

_____

PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY!!

If you don't know, leave it blank!!

VIDEO GAMES



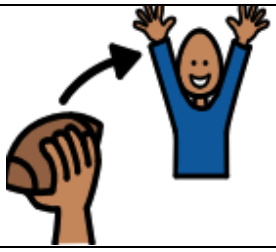
If applicable, Please list favorite video game system (i.e., Leap pad, V-Smile, PlayStation3, DS Lite, Xbox, Wii, etc,) and specific games played on these systems (i.e., Mario Brothers, etc.)

FAVORITE SPORTS to WATCH/ATTEND

If applicable, please list favorite sports/teams (professional and local) your child likes to watch or attend.

PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY!!

If you don't know, leave it blank!!

FAVORITE SPORTS to PLAY
 If applicable, please list favorite sports your child likes to play. Please name teams if appropriate.

COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES:

COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES
If applicable, please list community activities in which your child participates (ex. church, scouts, music lessons, etc.

PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY!!

If you don't know, leave it blank!!

Enders/McGowan with format and content largely borrowed from questionnaire by Janice Light 5/11

* Are there any vocabulary items that should be included about nature?

* Are there any vocabulary items that should be included about specific household items?

* Are there any specific vocabulary items that should be included about parts of the body or hygiene?

CLOTHING – Place a check beside the words the child would use.

* shirt
* pants
* shorts
* jeans
* dress
* underwear
* socks
* shoes
* boots
* sandals
* sneakers
* sweatshirt
* shirt
* t-shirt
* skirt
* pajamas
* bathing suit
* coat
* mittens
* gloves
* hat
* scarf

PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY!!
If you don't know, leave it blank!!

CLOTHING: Are there any other vocabulary items that should be included about clothing?

Foods/Drinks and Eating –

FAVORITE FOOD/DRINKS: What specific favorite foods and drinks would the child comment on or request?	

PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY!!

If you don't know, leave it blank!!

LEAST FAVORITE FOOD and DRINKS: What foods and drinks does the child **DISLIKE** that he/she would communicate about?	

*Is the child **allergic** to anything they may need to tell someone about?

Slang/Jokes/and Swearing (swearing for teenagers only)

What slang, jokes, swear words (teenagers only) or other unique phrases would your child want to use?	

PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY!!

If you don't know, leave it blank!!

GREETINGS/MANNERS:

* Are there any other vocabulary items that should be included to express greetings or politeness?

POSITIONING/ADAPTIVE EQUIPMENT/PERSONAL CARE:

Are there any specific words related to physical positioning, adaptive equipment, or other personal care needs that the child would need to say?

(ex. stander, wheelchair, suction, change positions, etc,)	

PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY!!

If you don't know, leave it blank!!

PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY!!
If you don't know, leave it blank!!