

From cats sitting on puzzles to reading books and road trips: Using analogies to illuminate concepts in AAC.

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Short Abstract

Teaching complex ideas can feel like solving a puzzle without a picture on the box. However, using analogies—those handy comparisons that link new concepts to things we already understand—can be transformative. For many, the concepts of augmentative and alternative communication are new and beyond their mainstream experience. Analogies allow the introduction or discussion of complex perspectives in a relatable and memorable way.

Analogies work by connecting new, complex ideas to familiar ones. A repertoire of effective analogies is a useful tool in our toolkit. These analogies can take various forms and are adaptable to the situation.

Whatever form of analogy you choose, there are important considerations to ensure that they land in a respectful and also effective way. When you find the perfect blend it will be like finding the perfect Christmas present for that hard-to-buy-for uncle. Once an analogy has landed, its value is strong and can be used repeatedly and efficiently to label or identify situations (e.g., “She’s a bit of a Karen”).

Analogies make complex ideas more memorable and easier to discuss. This presentation will share the benefits and considerations when using analogies, share a selection of favourites related to AAC, and how we can use them (as well as your own) when training communication partners, mentoring colleagues, or introducing new information to families.

Long Abstract

Teaching complex ideas can sometimes feel like trying to explain a complicated puzzle without showing the picture on the box. But using analogies—those handy comparisons that link new concepts to things we already know—can be a game-changer. This presentation will share some of my favourite analogies that you can take away to explain abstract concepts in a more understandable and enjoyable way. They can be used when training communication partners, mentoring or supporting colleagues, as well as collaborating and consulting with families throughout the augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) learning process.

Analogies work because they link new, often complex concepts to familiar ideas. This makes learning less overwhelming because our brains can use what we already know as a stepping stone to understand new concepts. The magic happens when we can pick the right analogies and use them well. Having some key analogies in your toolkit can be a good start. They can be

a story about an experience, a parallel concept, an everyday experience common to everyone, a song, meme, or even a photo.

Whatever form of analogy you choose, there are important considerations to ensure that they land in a respectful and also effective way. Your analogy can get a lot of the muscle work done for you in the first instance, but sometimes you will also have to add some explanations and limits. Once there is a shared understanding of the analogy, it is an effective tool to label or identify situations if and when you need to draw attention to them. After sharing an analogy, you might circle back at a later date, or help to bring perspective to a situation. For example, “Well that’s a bit of a cat on the puzzle situation”, or “let’s be careful we don’t end up with picnic pants here”.

Analogies are like a bridge between what someone already knows and what we are trying to explain or process with them. We can use them in explanations as well as brainstorming or to build on a shared understanding between a group of people. Analogies make complex ideas more approachable and memorable. With a bit of creativity and careful planning, you can use analogies to transform your explanations and make them more engaging and effective.

This presentation will share the benefits and considerations when using analogies as well as some favourites related to AAC, and spark your own creative use of analogies to suit your own purposes.