THE TOM TOM WAY

FOUR PILLARS

AUTISM, COMMUNICATION & INCLUSION

A COMPLETE SCHOOL RESOURCE



PRACTICAL TEACHING • VISUAL SUPPORTS • PRINTABLE CARDS

For autistic pupils with high support needs, including nonspeaking pupils

Created by Counsellor Tomass J. Wood

A4 | Print-friendly visual resources | England school context

Start here: how to use this manual

A staff-facing implementation guide with visual resources to photocopy, personalise and practise.

Who this is for

Teachers, SENCOs, pastoral leads, teaching assistants, speech and language therapists working with schools, autism specialists and school leaders in primary, secondary and specialist settings.

Which pupils?

Children and teenagers whose communication, sensory or daily living needs require substantial individual support. Some do not use speech; some speak occasionally, use echolalia, sign, gesture, eye gaze, objects, pictures or AAC devices. Do not assume understanding from speech output.

The purpose

Build more reliable ways to understand the pupil, reduce avoidable uncertainty and offer meaningful choice. The goal is participation, safety and quality of school life - not masking autistic traits.

A safe starting sequence

1. Read the principles and safeguarding pages.
2. Consult pupil, family and the speech and language therapist (SaLT).
3. Document existing communication and sensory supports.
4. Choose one tiny daily routine to improve.
5. Model pictures and respond to every valid communication mode.
6. Review pupil experience and adjust.

What is included

Evidence mapping; Four Pillars descriptions; AAC partner instructions; co-regulation routines; eight teaching examples; print-and-cut picture cards; communication boards; communication passport; sensory, choice and transition templates; a staff implementation plan and reference links.

Scope and safety

Not an autism treatment, diagnostic instrument or AAC assessment. Maintain the pupil’s established AAC, EHC plan, safeguarding plan and clinical advice. Obtain local approval before adoption.

Evidence / guidance: [1] [2] [3] [4] [5]

The central promise

Every pupil must be able to communicate in a way that others notice and respect.

Listen before interpreting

Behaviour, gestures and physiological changes can indicate communication, but adults must avoid treating guesses as certain. Check what is observable; offer meaningful options and involve people who know the pupil.

Communication is a right

YES, NO, STOP, HELP, PAIN, MORE, FINISHED, QUIET and a personalised way to report a problem must be accessible throughout the day - not only during “communication lessons”.

Teach the environment, too

A child may not be able to explain painful noise, a difficult transition or the need to stop. It is still the school’s job to adjust the environment and make a refusal possible.

Success means

The pupil experiences more understood choices, fewer preventable distressing situations, better access to learning and relationships, and increasing confidence that adults will respond.

Age is not language level

A nonspeaking 15-year-old is still a 15-year-old. Offer age-respectful activities, privacy, teenage interests and access to friendship, rather than automatically using infant themes.

Individual first

Use family knowledge, pupil preferences, SaLT and occupational therapy (OT) advice, sensory and mobility needs, cultural/language context, and the existing AAC system.

Evidence / guidance: [1] [2] [3] [4] [6]

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Printing: Keep the handbook as a staff reference. Print picture-card sheets single-sided at 100% on A4; laminate only if appropriate; trim corners safely. Preserve the pupil’s existing symbol system.

Autism is a spectrum, not one profile

High support needs are real; they do not describe the whole person.

Understand variation

An autistic pupil may have differences in communication, sensory processing, predictability and social interaction, but there is no single pattern. Intellectual disability, epilepsy, anxiety, ADHD, motor differences and physical illness may also be present.

Speech does not measure intelligence

A child who cannot express themselves through speech may understand far more than staff can easily observe. Equally, spoken sentences do not guarantee understanding or the ability to communicate a need during distress.

Start with what works

Record familiar interests, successful ways of refusing and requesting, trusted adults, safe movement, sensory preferences, pain indicators and the situations in which communication becomes easier.

Consider access first

Could the pupil see the picture, recognise it, touch it, point to it, look towards it or select it by switch? Can they keep their device with them? Adjust size, spacing and method of access.

Do not infer

Do not conclude a pupil “cannot understand” because they avoid eye contact, do not point on command, take extra processing time or communicate differently.

Terms used here

“Nonspeaking” and “minimally speaking” describe present speech use. Ask pupils and families which wording they prefer. “High support needs” refers to support required, not a fixed identity.

TRY IN SCHOOL Ask two familiar adults and the pupil to identify one reliable choice response.

CHECK & RECORD Describe observed responses, unresolved meanings and the access method agreed with SaLT.

Evidence / guidance: [1] [3] [5] [6]

Identity, agency and emotional wellbeing

Recognising and managing feelings starts with a supported sense of self.

Identity is more than a diagnosis

Provide opportunities to show preferences, strengths, interests, cultural identity and personal style. “I like trains”, “I dislike crowds”, “I need more time” and “I want to join” are forms of identity expression.

Self-management is supported

The long-term aim is not that pupils independently suppress distress. It is that they can notice comfort or discomfort, access help, use preferred supports and trust adults to respond. Co-regulation may remain appropriate throughout life.

Build the experience of choice

Every day, offer genuine decisions that will be honoured: seat, music, order of work, drink, movement, break location, activity partner and whether to participate in optional social tasks.

Measure the right outcomes

Look for increased access to communication, choice being respected, participation on the pupil’s terms, fewer unanticipated transitions, safety, wellbeing and stronger relationships.

Do not force identity activities

Some pupils do not want to label a feeling. They can indicate comfort, needs or preference without naming “sad” or “angry”.

Know the limit

Four Pillars can organise supportive questions. They are not a stand-alone evidence-based therapy, school accreditation or validated emotional assessment.

TRY IN SCHOOL Offer one age-respectful decision that genuinely changes the school day.

CHECK & RECORD Record the choice offered, how it was expressed and whether adults honoured it.

Evidence / guidance: [1] [4] [5] [6]

Research-to-practice map

Existing methods give practical foundations; Tom Tom adds a memorable organising language.

AAC and communication partners

Established AAC practice recognises multiple communication modes and no prerequisite skills for access. Tom Tom contribution: put usable YES/NO/STOP/HELP and pupil preferences into all Four Pillars.

Visual supports and TEACCH

Visual schedules, object cues and structured tasks can make time and expectations more predictable. Tom Tom contribution: place predictable routines within the Circles pillar.

Autism-informed communication

Advice stresses accessible language, sensory awareness, processing time and individual interests. Tom Tom contribution: frame these as Waves and Bridges, without assuming every autistic child is the same.

Positive support and context

NICE recommends exploring pain, mental health, communication differences, environment and transitions when behaviour becomes difficult. Tom Tom contribution: use a four-question review rather than labelling the child “difficult”.

AET progression and SEND

AET provides domains for communication, self-expression, sensory processing and relationships. EHC plans specify statutory educational support. Tom Tom contribution: link everyday classroom practices to existing agreed outcomes.

What the evidence does NOT show

There is currently no independent trial establishing that the Four Pillars themselves improve autism outcomes. Schools should test usability locally and record what changes.

TRY IN SCHOOL Choose one existing support (AAC, timetable, sensory plan) to organise under a Pillar.

CHECK & RECORD Check that the Four Pillars language adds clarity without replacing an effective system.

Evidence / guidance: [1] [2] [3] [4] [5] [7] [8]

Communication comes first

A pupil does not need to speak, point perfectly or “prove readiness” to receive AAC.

Multimodal communication

Respect speech, facial expression, movement, gesture, body position, sign, symbols, object cues, handwriting, switch access, eye gaze, phones and speech-generating devices. A pupil may use several modes in one day.

Essential vocabulary

Provide a consistent route to request, refuse, comment, ask, protest, joke, report pain, talk about people and make choices. Do not offer only “I want”; teach and model STOP, NO, HELP, WHAT, LIKE and NOT.

No prerequisite test

Do not withhold AAC because a pupil is “too young”, has limited eye contact, cannot match symbols, has a learning disability or is thought to be unlikely to speak.

Refer and coordinate

SaLT leads on individual AAC assessment and language planning. OT may advise physical/sensory access; vision and hearing professionals support access where needed. Educators embed the plan across contexts.

Use existing systems

Where a pupil already uses a communication book, app, objects or switches, do not replace vocabulary or page layouts with this pack without specialist agreement.

Keep AAC available

Communication is needed in the corridor, dining hall, toilet approach, playground, school transport and emergencies - not only on a desk.

TRY IN SCHOOL Take the pupil’s AAC on a corridor-to-classroom walk and note barriers.

CHECK & RECORD Count how many places STOP, HELP and refusal remain accessible.

Evidence / guidance: [2] [3] [4]

Picture cards: what they can and cannot do

The printable pictures later in this pack are starter visuals, not a complete AAC solution.

Three common functions

1. Receptive cue: show what is happening next. 2. Expressive choice: pupil selects a card to tell us something. 3. Shared conversation: adult models a symbol while talking or playing.

Symbols do not work by magic

Check if real objects, photos, line drawings or words are meaningful to the individual. Pair an unfamiliar picture with a real situation; show the outcome consistently.

Independent access

Offer larger cards, fewer alternatives, an eye-gaze frame, assisted scanning, digital AAC or tactile cues as appropriate. Record exactly how to interpret a choice.

PECS is a specific programme

PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System) is a registered, structured teaching protocol. A picture card or exchange is not automatically PECS. This document neither teaches the PECS protocol nor reproduces its protected symbol set.

Do not use cards as leverage

Never withhold water, toilet access, medication, sensory supports or a break until the pupil exchanges a card. Support communication without requiring it as the price of a basic need.

Test each picture

A new symbol should be tested with staff and family against the actual pupil’s access, preferences and understanding. Replace any confusing illustration.

TRY IN SCHOOL Test one new picture against a real object or familiar photograph.

CHECK & RECORD Note whether the pupil recognises the meaning or needs a different representation.

Evidence / guidance: [2] [3] [9] [10]

Model AAC without demanding a response

An adult can teach the meaning of a symbol by using it naturally and often.

Aided language modelling: 6 steps

1. Get the board within reach. 2. Join an activity the pupil has chosen. 3. Say a short natural phrase. 4. Point to one or two useful symbols on the pupil's system. 5. Pause and observe without demanding imitation. 6. Honour any clear response in any mode.

Example: a music break

Adult says "MORE MUSIC?" while indicating MORE and MUSIC. They wait quietly. The pupil may smile, vocalise, touch MORE, look towards the speaker, select NO or walk away. Check individual meaning and respond.

Repeat across places

Different adults should model the same useful vocabulary in different settings. Consistency includes responding to refusals and spontaneous communication, not only to adult-set tasks.

Avoid these habits

"Say it first"; hand-over-hand forced selection; repeated quizzing; taking away a device; insisting on eye contact; interpreting every movement as a fixed message; teaching one word only as a request.

When there is no visible reply

Wait. Reduce language. Offer a clear option. Model again later. Check discomfort, fatigue, hearing, motor access and the level of abstraction. A delayed response may still be a response.

Make access adult responsibility

The adult fetches, charges, positions and learns the system. The pupil does not have to "earn" communication by displaying compliance.

TRY IN SCHOOL Model STOP and MORE in a chosen activity without requiring imitation.

CHECK & RECORD Describe the adult pause, pupil response in any mode and whether it was respected.

Evidence / guidance: [2] [3] [4]

Selecting the right visual format

Match material to the pupil, not the pupil to a preprinted worksheet.

Object cues

A spoon for lunch or a towel for swimming may be clearer than photos. Use objects consistently; avoid handing an object that might distress or be medically unsafe.

Photographs

Use actual rooms, staff, equipment or preferred items when that is most meaningful. Seek consent and follow school data protection requirements for identifiable images.

Picture symbols and words

Use stable vocabulary and, where agreed, the pupil's established symbol library. Print large enough, use uncluttered contrast and label icons; colour is a helpful extra, never the only way to distinguish meaning.

Access methods

Direct touch, pointing, eye gaze, partner-assisted scanning, switching and whole-body responses can all support choice. Specialist input is needed when movements or sensory impairments complicate access.

Visual field and spacing

Begin with a layout the pupil can use, not an arbitrary "two cards only" rule. Too little vocabulary can also limit autonomy.

Nonvisual AAC

For pupils with vision differences, tactile symbols, objects, auditory scanning and specialist mobility/vision advice may be needed. A printout alone is inadequate.

TRY IN SCHOOL Compare an object, photograph and picture for one familiar routine.

CHECK & RECORD Record which format is most accessible, with no assumption that one suits all contexts.

Evidence / guidance: [2] [3] [4] [7]

Understanding the Four Pillars

Four practical questions can organise a staff conversation.

Brian’s: inner experience

What could the pupil be anticipating, noticing, remembering or trying to say? We do not read minds; we formulate possibilities and test them by improving communication and offering choice.

Waves: intensity and regulation

What sensory or emotional demands are rising? Does this pupil need movement, quiet, sensory relief, reduced demands, a trusted adult or medical attention?

Circles: predictable safety

What familiar objects, people, routines, places and advance warnings make a situation understandable? What changed without explanation?

Bridges: connection

How can we create a connection through preferred interests, an accessible activity, a supportive relationship or a working communication method?

Use a sequence

Observe → check health and safety → offer accessible communication → adjust Waves/Circles → create a Bridge → record and review. Do not use a four-part checklist to delay immediate help.

Example

A pupil covers their ears before assembly. Consider Waves (noise), Circles (different schedule), Brian’s (uncertainty, hypothesis only) and Bridges (visual alternative route and trusted staff member).

TRY IN SCHOOL Use four questions in a team discussion about one difficult transition.

CHECK & RECORD Distinguish observed facts from hypotheses and agree one adult/environment change.

Evidence / guidance: [1] [2] [4] [5]

Brian’s: identity and inner-world hypotheses

The pink pillar asks what the child might be experiencing - without pretending we know.

Why it matters

Autistic pupils with limited speech may be denied ordinary chances to reveal likes, dislikes, opinions and concerns. Brian’s makes space for identity and decisions.

Staff script

“There may be lots going on. I will show you choices. You can tell me yes, no or something else.” Model, pause, honour.

How to teach it

Introduce two useful contrasts grounded in real experience: LIKE/NOT LIKE, READY/NOT YET, WANT/DO NOT WANT. Use the pupil’s symbol system, real objects or photos and respond to choices.

Primary example

At art time offer paint, crayons and looking at the picture. A pupil chooses to look; staff record a valid preference.

When to avoid emotion labelling

Do not insist a distressed pupil select “angry”. Start with “STOP?”, “QUIET?”, “PAIN?”, “MORE TIME?” or a known regulation support.

Secondary example

A pupil chooses whether they want printed notes, headphones or a recorded summary. The pupil’s style and independence are respected.

TRY IN SCHOOL Offer two genuine preference options and one way to refuse.

CHECK & RECORD Check whether the pupil influenced the result instead of simply finishing a task.

Evidence / guidance: [2] [3] [4]

Brian’s: five ways to teach self-advocacy

Self-advocacy is the experience of having a choice respected.

1. Make preference visible

Offer real alternatives that differ. If every option is the same, the activity is not meaningful choice.

2. Model refusal

Adults can model NO, STOP and NOT NOW without fear or sanction. Honour a refusal where safe, and explain genuine limits simply.

3. Teach uncertainty

Include I DON’T KNOW, THINKING and MORE TIME for pupils who cannot immediately commit to an option.

4. Protect communication

Communication aids must remain accessible during behaviour incidents, transitions and supervised movement unless an immediate equipment safety issue requires a safe alternative.

5. Celebrate agency, not compliance

“You showed us you needed quiet” is better than “Good boy for using the right card.” Acknowledge the adult response too.

One-page record

Write three preferences known for certain, two possible preferences needing verification and one new opportunity for the pupil to express identity.

TRY IN SCHOOL Add MORE TIME or I DON’T KNOW to a pupil’s existing communication routine if agreed.

CHECK & RECORD Record whether adult prompting decreased and the pupil’s message was honoured.

Evidence / guidance: [2] [3] [4]

Waves: understanding sensory and emotional load

Blue pillar: intensity may change, and support can start before crisis.

What Waves can include

Noise, touch, bright light, smells, heat, crowding, pain, tiredness, demand overload, excitement, worry, frustration or relief. Each pupil's pattern is individual and context-dependent.

Observe gently

Note changes in pacing, withdrawal, muscle tension, communication attempts, covering ears, repetitive movement or breathing. These are clues, not universal severity scores.

Never ban harmless stimming

Rocking, tapping, flapping or repeating may support regulation. Intervene only when there is a clear safety concern, in line with an individualised plan.

A Waves ladder

Use just two zones if needed: COMFORTABLE / NEED SUPPORT. Only add a three- or five-point scale if the pupil can use it meaningfully; numeric scales are not suitable for everyone.

Staff response

Reduce input; offer familiar regulation supports; make language short; give time and space; protect dignity; check for pain; call for medical or safeguarding support where indicated.

Teach when calm

Model the break or quiet card during neutral moments, not only when the pupil is already overwhelmed.

TRY IN SCHOOL Locate one avoidable sensory demand and offer a safe alternative.

CHECK & RECORD Observe access and comfort before and after the environmental adjustment.

Evidence / guidance: [1] [4] [6]

Waves: co-regulation and distress response

Adults change the environment and their own behaviour before asking a child to change.

Co-regulation routine

Approach calmly from a respectful distance. Use minimal, predictable language. Offer STOP/BREAK/HELP and access to the established communication system. Reduce spectators and unnecessary demands.

Protect choice and sensory safety

Ask before touch; do not use unexpected physical contact, forced eye contact or compulsory breathing exercises. Give options for sitting, moving or quiet as appropriate.

After the episode

When the pupil is ready, restore relationships and routine. Adults review what changed and whether basic needs, pain, fatigue or communication access were missed.

At high risk

Use the school's safeguarding, medical, positive support and emergency procedures. The pack does not teach restraint or emergency physical interventions.

Restrictive practices

Physical restraint and seclusion are tightly governed school matters; proactive environmental and communication supports should aim to reduce need. Follow current DfE guidance and staff training.

Never punish a Wave

Withholding AAC, food, drink, comfort or access to a suitable break is not a regulation strategy.

TRY IN SCHOOL Rehearse an adult response using quiet, space, accessible STOP and a familiar support.

CHECK & RECORD Review adult actions and health/safety checks, never the pupil's compliance.

Evidence / guidance: [1] [6] [11] [12]

Circles: predictable and meaningful routines

Green pillar: routine is an access support, not a reward.

The Circle may be

A particular adult, morning greeting, personalised timetable, home-school item, familiar seat, music cue, comfort object, reliable sequence or an agreed sensory space.

Use “now / next / later”

Show what is happening, what follows and when the pupil can reconnect with something familiar. If plans change, update the visual and show the new outcome.

Familiar does not mean rigid

Make change safer with warning, concrete information, extra processing time, practice journeys or a stable support person. Predictability prepares change; it does not forbid it.

Build the daily schedule

Use the pupil’s preferred format: objects, photos, symbols, words, auditory prompts or personal device. Refer to it at transitions; move or mark completed items.

Protect age-appropriate Circles

For teenagers: preferred music, bus route, device charging, timetable notifications, peer support, locker and privacy routines may matter more than cartoon timetables.

Consider trauma and loss

Do not remove a comfort item merely because it appears “too young”. Discuss safe, dignified access with pupil and family.

TRY IN SCHOOL Make the end of one routine visibly clear using the pupil’s preferred format.

CHECK & RECORD Check whether the pupil knows what comes next and can signal a change.

Evidence / guidance: [1] [4] [7]

Circles: transitions and new environments

A successful transition begins before the corridor gets crowded.

Before a change

Create a photo route, familiar-person introduction, practice visit or short visual account. Show the whole event, including how it ends.

During a change

Offer an accessible warning and route to PAUSE / HELP. The pupil may need a less crowded time, a transition object or the option to travel separately.

After a change

Confirm arrival, orient to the next step, give regulation time, and invite feedback through any communication mode.

Primary: lunch hall

Show lunch, food choice, eating space, then next activity. If the hall is overwhelming, plan a quieter alternative.

Secondary: lesson change

Preview room and teacher, show corridor route and permitted headphones, provide pass to an agreed quieter route if appropriate.

Measure

Does the pupil know what is next? Are fewer changes unexpected? Can they signal PAUSE or CHANGE? Does the plan survive staff absence?

TRY IN SCHOOL Prepare a full transition route including arrival and an agreed quiet alternative.

CHECK & RECORD Ask whether the pupil could predict the change and choose a support.

Evidence / guidance: [4] [7] [8]

Bridges: communication and belonging

Purple pillar: connect through what the child genuinely values.

Create a Bridge

An interest, shared project, story, music track, technology, book, movement game or favourite object can become the starting point for two-way communication.

Offer social access without pressure

Being beside a peer, sharing materials at a distance, sending a message or watching a group can be valid participation. Friendship is not measured by eye contact or verbal chat.

Work with peers respectfully

Teach peers to wait, accept AAC, ask before touching aids or bodies, include without talking over the autistic pupil and respect a “no”.

Primary classroom Bridge

Join a pupil’s interest in buses: match route pictures, practise NEXT, read a map, or co-create a bus timetable.

Secondary classroom Bridge

A pupil interested in astronomy contributes to science using preloaded vocabulary, typing, a symbol board or a paired activity with time to respond.

Bridge audit

Who truly knows the pupil’s communication? Does the pupil have at least one safe adult and an accessible means to interact with peers?

TRY IN SCHOOL Use one genuine interest to invite participation without demanding eye contact.

CHECK & RECORD Record chosen participation and any preferred way to connect with peers.

Evidence / guidance: [3] [4] [5]

Bridges: build participation across curriculum

Start with the lesson goal and remove unnecessary communication barriers.

Literacy

Offer story choices, read-aloud controls, symbols for characters/feelings, switch-activated page turns or preferred text format. “Understanding a story” need not require spoken retelling.

Mathematics

Use objects, numbered overlays, eye-gaze options or AAC words such as MORE, SAME, DIFFERENT and FINISHED. Distinguish motor performance from mathematical understanding.

Science and humanities

Teach subject vocabulary in the existing AAC system before the lesson, offer observation choices and age-appropriate topics even when symbol access is elementary.

PE, art and music

Make STOP/GO, QUIET/LOUD, MORE/FINISHED and choice of materials accessible. Never assume enjoyment from movement or sound exposure.

Assessment

Use an appropriate alternative response route, record the adaptations and follow examination access rules when relevant.

Do not confuse scaffolding with simplification

Reduce communication effort while retaining an intellectually meaningful curriculum, as suited to the individual pupil.

TRY IN SCHOOL Select one curriculum objective and offer a different response route.

CHECK & RECORD Separate subject understanding from pointing, handwriting or speaking demands.

Evidence / guidance: [2] [4] [5]

The Four Pillars in one daily cycle

A predictable routine for every member of staff.

Before arrival

Check communication system is charged and reachable. Read today's changes. Prepare sensory supports and accessible options.

Transition

Update the Circle, name a change succinctly, offer visual route and keep STOP/HELP available.

Morning welcome

Use a familiar greeting or none if preferred. Show NOW / NEXT. Offer a genuine preference. Check comfort and signs of illness.

Regulation moment

Notice the Wave, reduce demand/input, offer supports and protect communication access.

Teaching block

Join attention through an interest. Model useful AAC, pause, support response in any mode and provide access to a break.

End-of-day review

Record one understood preference, one access barrier removed and one outstanding question. Share only necessary information with home and authorised staff.

TRY IN SCHOOL Agree a one-minute AAC / schedule / comfort check before the morning starts.

CHECK & RECORD Track missed access points and one barrier removed at day's end.

Evidence / guidance: [2] [4] [7]

Environment and sensory access audit

A practical walk-through for the SENDCo and pupil team.

Sound and light

Observe fluorescent flicker, echo, bells, hand dryers, crowded corridors, projector glare and fire-alarm response arrangements. Build reasonable, safe adjustments.

Movement and body

Consider chair and standing options, access routes, tactile sensitivity, opportunities for safe movement and OT-recommended supports.

Visual and language load

Avoid cluttered notices, long spoken instructions and ever-changing symbol positions. Make key words and signposts consistent.

Communication station

The pupil's AAC travels with them. Provide a safe, accessible place for spare printed backup symbols and charging; do not put a board where the pupil cannot reach it.

Medical and safeguarding

Review seizure, allergy, mobility, continence and pain plans as relevant. Follow the school medical and safeguarding protocols.

Record modifications

Who is responsible, when will it be done, how will the pupil tell us whether it helps, and when is the review date?

TRY IN SCHOOL Walk the busiest route at pupil height or using the relevant access perspective.

CHECK & RECORD List noise, light, crowding and physical obstacles with a named owner.

Evidence / guidance: [1] [4] [8] [13]

Pain, health and unmet needs: always check

A sudden change in communication or behaviour may be a health issue.

Before assuming “behaviour”

Consider dental pain, ear infection, constipation, reflux, headache, menstruation, dehydration, injury, sensory discomfort, medication changes, sleep problems or other illness as clinically relevant.

Accessible health communication

Keep PAIN, BODY, HURT, TOILET, SICK, REST and HELP options, personalised body maps or established clinical pain tools where appropriate.

Record facts

Use observable description: “pulled at right ear twice and refused snack”, rather than “attention seeking”. Escalate new or unexplained signs according to medical guidance.

Do not wait for a card

A child need not symbolically report pain before receiving medical attention. Interpreting physical signs requires caregiver information and professional judgement.

Personalised profiles

Identify known pain indicators and medical escalation contacts with family and healthcare professionals; treat these as provisional, not infallible.

Call emergency services

Use standard school emergency pathways for urgent symptoms or immediate danger; communication teaching must never delay emergency care.

TRY IN SCHOOL Ask family and clinical staff about individual pain signals and escalation plans.

CHECK & RECORD Record objective health clues separately from interpretations of behaviour.

Evidence / guidance: [1] [6] [14]

Positive support: the first question is “why?”

Behaviour is information; it does not always reveal its meaning.

Look at context

Record what preceded an incident: demands, changes, sensory input, peer interaction, inaccessible AAC, missed food, fatigue, possible pain or loss of a familiar adult.

Adult changes

Alter the environment, communicate expectations, adapt transitions and offer predictable options before increasing demands.

Use functional thinking

Ask what need the action might meet and how adults can offer a safer, clearer way to meet it. Follow any agreed specialist functional assessment or positive behaviour support plan.

Safeguarding threshold

Disclosure through a device, symbol, gesture or behaviour must be taken seriously and documented according to local policy. Do not repeatedly question or lead the child.

Protect dignity

Do not demand apologies, public explanations or forced eye contact after an incident. Restore a sense of safety and connection first.

Escalation

Persistent distress or safety risk needs multidisciplinary review, not an improvised Four Pillars “behaviour programme”.

TRY IN SCHOOL Rewrite an incident account using context, communication and adult response.

CHECK & RECORD Identify at least one change that could prevent avoidable distress.

Evidence / guidance: [1] [6] [11] [12]

Do no harm: consent, refusal and safeguarding

The pupil’s dignity applies regardless of speech or support needs.

Consent to touch and care

Explain personal care in an accessible way, follow consent and best-interest procedures where applicable, protect privacy and recognise resistance or distress. Never frame assent as a permanent one-off.

Trust a NO

Teach a reliable route for STOP and NO. Respect refusal wherever safely possible; explain unavoidable actions and offer choice about how they happen.

Do not suppress communication

Do not force hand-over-hand picture selection, remove an AAC device for “misbehaviour”, or require comfort items to be surrendered merely as a reward system.

Safeguarding disclosures

A pupil may indicate fear or harm by device, symbols, drawings, behaviour change or a trusted adult. Follow KCSIE 2026 and school reporting processes promptly.

Physical intervention

Follow England’s current DfE rules and local policy. Restrictive practices are not instructed by this resource; prevention and reduction are the priority.

No stand-alone replacement

This pack complements - never overrides - SaLT guidance, EHC provision, medical care plans, safeguarding policies and the child’s own communication choices.

TRY IN SCHOOL Audit where a pupil can say NO or STOP during routine activities and care.

CHECK & RECORD Record any response not honoured and discuss safe alternatives with leadership.

Evidence / guidance: [1] [11] [12] [13] [15]

Primary example: a noisy classroom

Age 6; limited speech; communicates with objects, sounds and a personalised board.

Scene

A pupil begins to rock intensely when the class prepares for a singing assembly. The adult notices ear covering and moves the board within reach.

Four Pillars review

Brian's: uncertainty is possible, not a known fact. Waves: noise is increasing. Circles: normal timetable has changed. Bridges: the pupil trusts a familiar teaching assistant.

Staff response

Show ASSEMBLY, QUIET ROOM and HEADPHONES using familiar formats. Say "You can choose". Honour the choice; provide agreed alternative access.

What not to do

Do not insist on singing, require eye contact or ask them to prove "sad" using a new symbol before permitting a break.

What success looks like

Pupil's preferred route is followed; staff prevent escalation; future assemblies are previewed; the pupil retains access to music in a preferred setting.

Practice for staff

Role-play where one adult uses only short phrases and models QUIET / MORE / STOP. Other staff identify access failures.

TRY IN SCHOOL Plan two real options for assembly and model QUIET / STOP beforehand.

CHECK & RECORD Monitor the chosen route and changes in comfort and participation.

Evidence / guidance: [1] [2] [4]

Secondary example: corridor overload

Age 14; nonspeaking; uses a speech-generating device and eye gaze.

Scene

At lesson change, a pupil pauses near the stairs, turns away and selects STOP. A staff member is tempted to insist on moving because the bell has rung.

What not to do

Do not remove the device, physically hurry the pupil without a safety reason or use infant-themed reward charts.

Four Pillars review

Brian's: pupil may want more time or privacy. Waves: busy corridor and noise. Circles: route changed because of a room swap. Bridges: established pastoral adult can communicate the choice.

What success looks like

Safe arrival with reduced distress; consistent route adjustment; pupil's STOP is treated as meaningful communication.

Staff response

Acknowledge STOP; offer QUIETER ROUTE, WAIT and HELP on the pupil's established device, alongside an accessible written/photo plan.

Next actions

Update the timetable, identify acceptable exit times and agree the plan with the pupil, family and relevant professionals.

TRY IN SCHOOL Prepare a teenage-appropriate visual route and practise an accessible pause.

CHECK & RECORD Check that STOP is respected and the pupil arrives without unnecessary pressure.

Evidence / guidance: [1] [2] [4]

Primary teaching example: feelings and needs

A 15-minute routine, 2–3 times a week, embedded in familiar enjoyable activity.

Prepare

Choose a real activity the pupil likes (music, bubbles, rolling a ball, craft). Put existing AAC at hand; make MORE, STOP, HELP and FINISHED accessible.

Step 1: model

Adult starts the activity and points to MORE on the existing system when continuing; points to STOP when pausing. Use natural speech and allow processing time.

Step 2: respond

Any clear choice or refusal is respected. Help interpret ambiguous signals by offering the activity again with a predictable pause; do not keep demanding symbol selection.

Step 3: connect to Pillars

Brian's: "You like that." (only if preference is clear). Waves: "Too loud?" / "Quiet?" Circles: show predictable START and FINISH. Bridges: use the pupil's favourite activity as shared participation.

Adapt for severe motor needs

Use partner-assisted scanning or eye-gaze access prescribed in the individual plan. A physical pointing task is not the objective.

Observe

Record evidence of understandable preference, adult response and access to the communication aid; avoid "number of compliant trials".

TRY IN SCHOOL Use 15 minutes of an enjoyable activity to model MORE / STOP without quizzing.

CHECK & RECORD Record communication opportunities and adult responsiveness.

Evidence / guidance: [2] [3] [4]

Secondary teaching example: control and identity

A 20–25-minute flexible learning activity that respects teenage preferences.

Prepare

Offer age-appropriate options: music genres, photographs, technology projects, art themes, sports highlights or science topics, as appropriate to the learner.

Step 1: identity choices

Invite “I LIKE”, “NOT FOR ME”, “MORE” or “STOP” through the pupil’s AAC. Write down chosen interests with the pupil’s agreement.

Step 2: planning a day

Use NOW / NEXT / LATER alongside a preferred activity, tutor contact or independent study space. Offer a meaningful choice about order where feasible.

Step 3: self-advocacy

Show how to request time, quiet, privacy, a different partner or help. Model an adult saying: “Thank you for telling me. I’ll change it.”

Four Pillars connection

Brian’s = preference; Waves = stress or excitement; Circles = predictable structure; Bridges = sharing an interest with a trusted peer or teacher.

Outcome

The young person experiences authorship of a real choice and communicates preferences that influence the school day.

TRY IN SCHOOL Offer a choice of topic, response format or setting in a secondary lesson.

CHECK & RECORD Record whether the pupil’s expressed preference shaped the learning experience.

Evidence / guidance: [2] [3] [4]

A school-wide six-week launch

Adopt one manageable habit at a time; preserve existing interventions.

Week 1 — map and listen

Identify a pupil cohort, consult pupils/families, review EHC goals and AAC systems. Baseline communication access and environmental barriers.

Week 2 — remove barriers

Position AAC everywhere, create symbol/real-object backups, identify one predictable routine and ensure all staff can model STOP/HELP.

Week 3 — teach the language

Introduce the Four Pillars to staff; teach modelling; verify symbols are individually meaningful with SaLT input.

Week 4 — teach in routines

Trial a Circles visual transition and a Bridges interest-based interaction. Keep a brief observation record.

Week 5 — review distress

Use Waves/environment reviews and pain checks; revise a situation where staff currently rely on verbal instructions.

Week 6 — pupil-led review

Ask what worked using accessible methods; consult family and SaLT; update plan; decide whether to extend. Report limits and unwanted effects as well as strengths.

TRY IN SCHOOL Nominate a lead, choose one accessible routine and schedule the first review.

CHECK & RECORD Measure implementation as well as pupil experience; include unwanted effects.

Evidence / guidance: [1] [2] [4] [8]

Staff induction: the 45-minute session

A practical outline for teachers, support staff and school leaders.

0–10 min: rights and variability

Communication is multimodal. Different pupils need different symbols and access methods. No eye-contact, speech or symbol-matching prerequisite.

10–20 min: Four Pillars

Use a case example to ask what might be thought or felt (Brian's), increasing load (Waves), predictability (Circles) and connection (Bridges).

20–30 min: modelling

Demonstrate accessible yes/no/stop/help with the actual communication system. Practise pausing, modelling without testing and honouring refusal.

30–40 min: scenario

Take a real transition and design a safer alternative with advance warning, accessible choices, sensory adjustments and a route to help.

40–45 min: commitments

Each adult writes one practice to change tomorrow, one person to consult and one review date.

Safeguarding note

Staff must also complete school-required safeguarding, intimate care, de-escalation and AAC training. This briefing does not confer specialist competence.

TRY IN SCHOOL Practise symbol modelling, a genuine choice and accepting refusal in pairs.

CHECK & RECORD Each staff member writes one action they will change tomorrow.

Evidence / guidance: [2] [4] [11] [15]

Staff coaching: practise the response

Use the scenarios as scripts, then watch whether the adult honours the message.

Role-play A: STOP

Adult offers drawing; pupil selects STOP. Best response: “Okay, stop.” Make a new choice available after respecting the original refusal.

Role-play B: no response

Adult points to a symbol and waits. Pupil does not select anything. Best response: give processing time, observe, model later; check access and avoid escalating prompts.

Role-play C: pain possibility

Pupil shows a sudden change in movement and avoids eating. Best response: medical escalation and accessible care, not an extra emotion worksheet.

Role-play D: teenager

Pupil chooses an interest peers consider unusual. Best response: use the interest for curriculum access without embarrassment or forced disclosure.

Observer checklist

Was AAC accessible? Was processing time given? Was refusal respected? Were words brief? Was there a possible sensory or health barrier?

Feedback

Describe adult actions objectively; agree one improvement and practise again. Do not score the pupil’s “compliance”.

TRY IN SCHOOL Run a role-play where the pupil selects NO to a teacher-preferred activity.

CHECK & RECORD Check that the adult accepts refusal and offers a meaningful next option.

Evidence / guidance: [1] [2] [3]

Individual plan: from assessment to action

Link Four Pillars questions to existing statutory provision and professional goals.

Document current provision

Record EHC plan outcomes, SaLT advice, OT recommendations, medical/sensory plans and communication passport. This pack must not dilute specified support.

Set one clear goal

Example: “During a daily transition, the pupil has consistent access to an agreed STOP/WAIT response and staff honour it whenever safely possible.”

Write the adult action

Exactly where is the card/device, who prepares the schedule, how long is the pause and what happens if the pupil declines?

Choose person-centred measures

Track communication opportunities offered, successful adult responses, distress triggers removed and pupil preference, rather than only reductions in incidents.

Review the interpretation

Ask family and professionals whether the observed behaviour could mean something else. Adjust when evidence changes.

Share safely

Keep personal records secure under local information governance. Use anonymised examples in training and external publicity.

TRY IN SCHOOL Write one goal as an adult support action rather than a pupil obedience target.

CHECK & RECORD Confirm it aligns with the EHC plan and the SaLT communication profile.

Evidence / guidance: [1] [2] [8] [13]

Evaluation: does the pupil benefit?

The approach is a developing framework; honest local evaluation is essential.

Baseline week

Observe a routine for a week. Count accessible communication opportunities, whether adults respond to STOP/HELP, unnecessary delays and signs of distress, with individual context.

Use cautious language

Report “staff observed more opportunities to refuse during lunch” rather than “the framework treated autism”.

Implementation check

Record whether staff actually use the agreed system and whether the pupil has consistent access. A poorly implemented aid cannot be fairly evaluated.

Pupil voice

Collect accessible feedback with established communication methods. If the pupil dislikes the materials, change them.

Review after 4–6 weeks

Ask whether autonomy, comfort, participation and the quality of adult responses improved. Look for negative effects: increased demand, overwhelm or loss of existing AAC.

Decide next step

Continue, modify or stop each element. Professional disagreement and family concerns should be documented and acted on.

TRY IN SCHOOL Choose a short baseline period and three pupil-centred indicators.

CHECK & RECORD Report what improved, did not improve and was changed following feedback.

Evidence / guidance: [1] [2] [5]

Partnering with parents and carers

Continuity without demanding that families reproduce school programmes.

Ask what the child chooses

Which signals mean enough, stop, tired, pain, excitement? Which are uncertain? What helps after a difficult day? What are the important family routines or languages?

Share one agreed symbol at a time

Where helpful, coordinate a small vocabulary set using the same representation and meaning as the pupil's established system.

Respect family realities

Do not set daily home worksheets as a condition of school progress. Support different communication languages and access to translated information where required.

Return the learning

Share specific observations: "She used her device to request music and we played it," rather than general labels.

Make changes collaboratively

New sensory or personal care arrangements should be agreed with relevant parties and checked for safety and privacy.

Feedback invitation

Give families a choice of written, spoken, translated or supported AAC feedback. Document their corrections to the communication passport.

TRY IN SCHOOL Share one specific school observation and invite correction or clarification.

CHECK & RECORD Update the communication passport only after the source and meaning are checked.

Evidence / guidance: [1] [2] [4] [8]

Quality assurance before printing

Every symbol system needs a usability and safeguarding check.

Readability

Check card labels and icon contrast, language clarity, printer size, visual clutter and whether the pupil can access the selected format.

Recognisability

Test illustrations with the pupil in familiar activities. If not meaningful, use photos, objects, tactile cues or the current AAC symbols instead.

Choice validity

Ensure NO / STOP / FINISHED and ways to report discomfort remain on every relevant board, not hidden in a separate page.

Physical safety

Round cut corners; secure cards appropriately; avoid small loose items when mouthing or choking risks are present; follow infection-control procedures.

Rights and authorship

Avoid photos of pupils without the correct permissions. Do not put personal health information on displays visible to everyone.

Maintenance

Nominate a person to replace damaged cards, update photos when adults/rooms change and check AAC access at each transition.

TRY IN SCHOOL Test print size, icon meaning, accessible selection and physical card safety.

CHECK & RECORD Log any symbol rejected or misunderstood, and replace it promptly.

Evidence / guidance: [2] [3] [4] [15]

What this pack does not claim

Professional boundaries make a resource safer and more credible.

Not an autism therapy

The Four Pillars are a developing narrative and practical framework by Counsellor Tomass J. Wood. They have not been independently validated as a clinical treatment, assessment tool or classroom intervention.

Not a replacement for AAC

Original picture cards are examples for exploration and personalisation. They do not substitute for a SaLT-led individual AAC system, including speech-generating technology.

Not a restraint protocol

No page authorises punishment, coercive compliance, exclusion, restraint or seclusion. Such matters require legal, safeguarding and specialist policy compliance.

What it CAN offer

A shared accessible set of questions about identity and thoughts, sensory and emotional load, predictability, and connection - integrated with established individual supports.

Before full deployment

Ask a qualified SaLT and local SEND staff to review symbols and access; obtain school approval and respect family and pupil feedback.

Edition statement

Version 1.0 | October 2026 | UK (England) school context. Review against future national guidance and the individual pupil's evolving needs.

TRY IN SCHOOL Describe this as a developing school discussion and access framework.

CHECK & RECORD Avoid implying clinical validation or that existing statutory or specialist plans can be replaced.

Evidence / guidance: [1] [2] [4] [8]

Quick evidence comparison

How widely used approaches relate to Tom Tom - without claiming equivalence.

AAC / aided modelling	Supports communication without a speech prerequisite.	**Bridges + Brian's** SaLT must individualise access.
TEACCH schedules	Makes order and transitions visible.	**Circles** Format must match pupil.
Autism-informed supports	Processing time, sensory adjustments, interests.	**Waves + Bridges** Observe individual needs.
NICE contextual review	Checks pain, environment and transitions when distressed.	**All four** Not a diagnostic algorithm.
AET progression	Identifies meaningful participation and communication goals.	**All four** EHC goals take precedence.

Sources: [1] [2] [3] [4] [5] [7] [8]

PRINTABLE COMMUNICATION TOOLKIT

The following pages contain original, deliberately simple icons for school use. Print at 100% on A4. These are not PECS symbols and are not a standardised or fully assessed AAC vocabulary.

Card sheets

Five thematic sets of nine individually cuttable cards: communication, body and needs, daily school life, feelings and preferences, school choices.

Communication boards

A 12-word everyday board and a starter choice board. The pupil's own AAC system must remain available.

Routines and regulation

NOW / NEXT / LATER, simplified Waves support choices, change/transition map.

Planning and evidence

Pupil communication passport, staff response plan, observation log and accessibility checklist.

Use with SaLT advice

Do not assume a picture is understood. The pupil might need objects, photographs, tactile symbols, a device or eye-gaze access.

Core communication

Cards that must be easy to reach and obeyed in safe situations.



YES



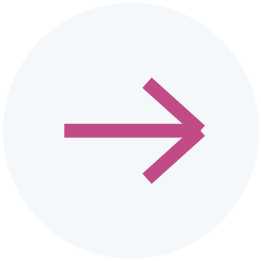
NO



STOP



HELP



MORE



FINISHED



BREAK



WAIT



I CHOOSE

Tom Tom Universe | Original starter icons | Print 100% | Not a substitute for personal AAC

My body and needs

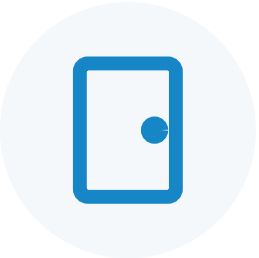
Check physical needs: do not insist on a picture before providing care.



DRINK



FOOD



TOILET



HURT / PAIN



TIRED



QUIET



MOVE



MUSIC



SPACE

Tom Tom Universe | Original starter icons | Print 100% | Not a substitute for personal AAC

My school day

Use photos or objects instead when these drawings are not recognised.



SCHOOL



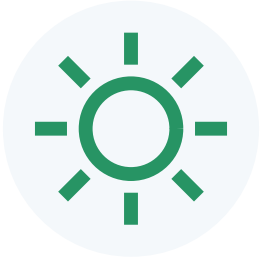
HOME



TEACHER



FRIEND



NOW



NEXT



CHANGE



LATER



READ / BOOK

Tom Tom Universe | Original starter icons | Print 100% | Not a substitute for personal AAC

Feelings and preferences

Only use feeling labels when meaningful. Need-based choices may work better.



HAPPY



SAD



WORRIED



ANGRY



TOO MUCH



CALM



I LIKE IT



NOT FOR ME



MORE TIME

Tom Tom Universe | Original starter icons | Print 100% | Not a substitute for personal AAC

Choices and school access

Age-neutral vocabulary for both primary and secondary classrooms.



TOO LOUD



TOO BRIGHT



HEADPHONES



MY TURN



ASK ME



WRITING



OUTSIDE



I DON’T KNOW

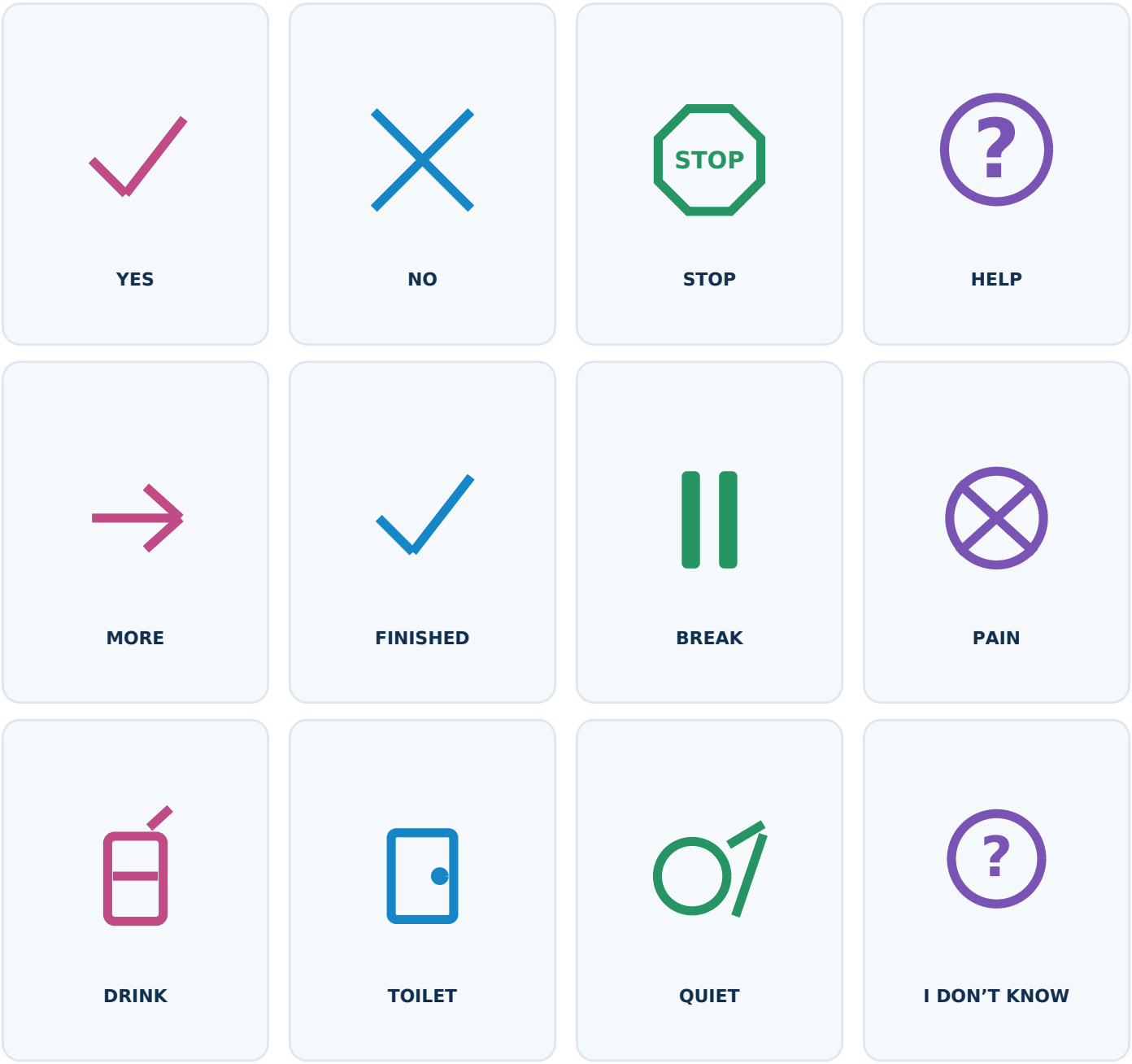


TOGETHER

Tom Tom Universe | Original starter icons | Print 100% | Not a substitute for personal AAC

Everyday communication board

A simple example only. Put the pupil’s established AAC first; change size and words with SaLT advice.



Choice and refusal board

Offer actual options with an honoured NO, STOP and MORE TIME. Add real photos or objects inside empty boxes.

OPTION A / PHOTO

OPTION B / PHOTO



YES



NO



STOP



MORE TIME

Adult response: acknowledge choice; act on it or explain clearly why an action cannot happen now. Never imply refusal is incorrect.

NOW · NEXT · LATER

Use one panel or all three. Personalise with object cues, photos, written words or the pupil’s existing symbols.

NOW

PLACE PICTURE / OBJECT

NEXT

PLACE PICTURE / OBJECT

LATER

PLACE PICTURE / OBJECT

A change is easier when the pupil knows what will happen afterwards.

My Wave and what helps

Offer a two-level version first if that is meaningful. A numbered scale is optional, not required.



COMFORTABLE



NEED SUPPORT

HELPFUL THINGS I CAN CHOOSE



QUIET



BREAK



MOVE



MUSIC



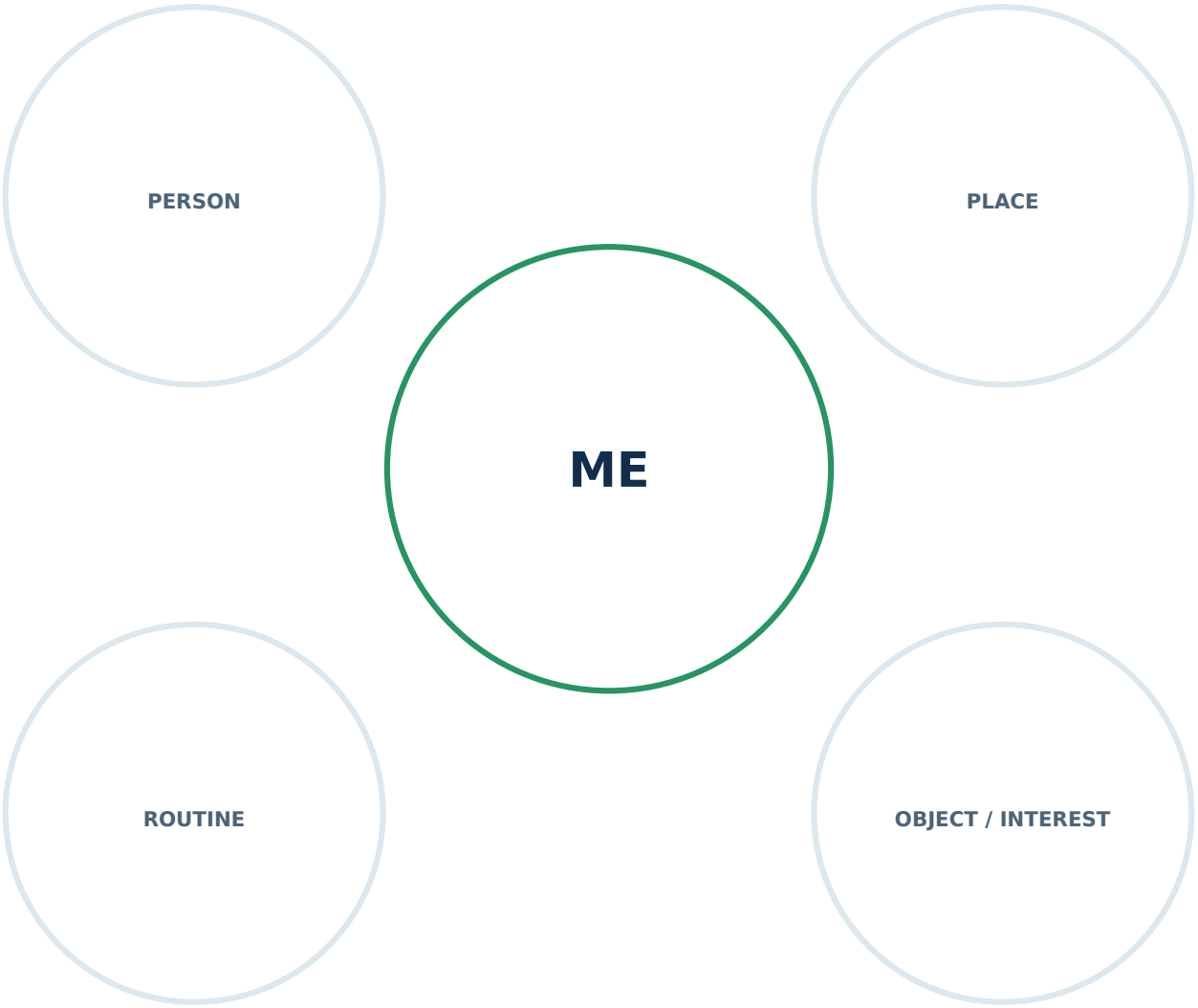
HELP



SPACE

My Circle of comfort

Choose genuine comforts together. Secondary pupils may prefer text or photographs instead of drawings.



When things change, which familiar support can the pupil keep or access? Record the pupil’s own preferences, not only adult assumptions.

Brian’s: know what I prefer

Use actual choices. Do not require a pupil to identify a feeling or explain why they dislike something.

I LIKE	NOT FOR ME	I AM NOT SURE

Offer choice through the pupil’s own AAC and record how their response was interpreted.

Bridge builder: ways I connect

Mark what the pupil chooses or enjoys, not what adults think they should tolerate.



MUSIC

○



READING

○



MOVEMENT

○



WITH A FRIEND

○



QUIET TOGETHER

○



OUTSIDE

○

PERSON I CHOOSE TO CONNECT WITH

Four Pillars problem-solving cards

Cut into four mini-prompts for staff coaching or the end of a lesson.

BRIAN'S

What choice or message might we be missing?
What do we know, and what are we only guessing?

WAVES

What noise, light, pain, emotion or demand could be too much?
What can adults reduce now?

CIRCLES

What changed?
Which familiar person, object or predictable step would help?

BRIDGES

Which trusted person, interest or accessible communication route can connect us?

Pupil communication passport

Co-create with pupil, family and SaLT. Store securely and provide approved extracts to relevant staff.

Pupil preferred name / age / class

How I say YES, NO and STOP (observed, not assumed)

My communication system and access method

How adults should model, pause and respond

What comforts me / what may overwhelm me

Possible pain indicators / medical plan reference

My interests and how I like to connect

Agreed reviewers / date of next review

One-page Four Pillars support plan

Use alongside an EHC plan, AAC plan, medical and safeguarding procedures - never in their place.

Pupil / agreed contributors / date

BRIAN'S: preferences, refusal and identity choices

WAVES: sensory cues, health checks and safe supports

CIRCLES: timetable, transition and comfort supports

BRIDGES: preferred people, topics and communication access

Adult actions, responsibilities and review date

Observation without assumption

Record facts, adult response and the pupil’s experience. Keep records securely.

Date / place / adult / routine

What happened BEFORE? (change, demands, sensory, health clues)

What did the pupil DO or COMMUNICATE? (observable only)

What communication access and choices were available?

How did ADULTS respond? What changed in the environment?

Outcome / pupil feedback / what we will change next time

Staff daily access checklist

A 60-second check. Tick Yes / No / Action needed. Review with the pupil's team.

The pupil's established AAC is present, working and reachable.	Y	N	?
YES / NO / STOP / HELP are accessible in the pupil's format.	Y	N	?
Staff know the pupil's actual response/access method.	Y	N	?
Today's schedule is accurate and change is explained.	Y	N	?
Break, movement, comfort and quiet options are available.	Y	N	?
Sensory and medical considerations have been reviewed.	Y	N	?
There is an agreed adult who will honour communication.	Y	N	?
At least one genuine preference is offered and respected.	Y	N	?
Peers and staff use the pupil's preferred respectful communication.	Y	N	?
A relevant feedback or review action is recorded.	Y	N	?

ONE BARRIER TO REMOVE / STAFF OWNER / REVIEW DATE

Family conversation and pupil voice

Use the child’s chosen communication form and never replace first-hand pupil preferences with adult guesses.

What does the pupil enjoy or choose independently?

How does the pupil express refusal or discomfort?

What objects, people, activities or routines feel reassuring?

What changes at home or school may influence wellbeing?

What are we unsure about? How will we check?

What single school change would make the biggest difference?

Primary / secondary adaptation grid

An age-respectful checklist for teachers and SENDCOs planning together.

Picture vocabulary	PRIMARY: food, play, story, toilet, movement, help.	SECONDARY: lesson, privacy, route, friendship, device, choice.
Predictable routine	Objects/photos may lead; show finish clearly.	Phone/printed timetable; room swaps and travel route.
Interests	Familiar character, transport, songs, crafts.	Music, gaming, science, fashion, media, technology.
Choice and identity	Who, where, what activity, how loud?	Work method, music, privacy, break location, peer.
Participation	Play, shared reading, object exploration.	Subject tasks, practical study, clubs, qualifications.
Measure	Access to request/refusal, enjoyment, safety.	Self-advocacy, chosen supports, age-respectful access.

Six-week implementation tracker

Fill in a realistic target, lead person, review date and an honest summary of what happened.

WEEK 1 **Listen & baseline**

Action / owner:

WEEK 2 **Remove access barriers**

Action / owner:

WEEK 3 **Model AAC & Four Pillars**

Action / owner:

WEEK 4 **Use routines and interests**

Action / owner:

WEEK 5 **Review distress and safety**

Action / owner:

WEEK 6 **Pupil-led evaluation**

Action / owner:

Safety and access sign-off

Complete before introducing new picture cards in a school setting.

- [ ] Pupil or family views sought and recorded
- [ ] SaLT advice considered for existing AAC and symbol selection
- [ ] Sensory, vision and motor access checks completed
- [ ] NO / STOP / HELP / PAIN available in a reliable format
- [ ] Safeguarding, medical and risk arrangements aligned
- [ ] All relevant staff know how to respond to refusals
- [ ] No basic needs are contingent on card exchanges
- [ ] Review date, owner and feedback route agreed

Signed / role / date

SHORT GLOSSARY

AAC	Augmentative and alternative communication: aids and methods that supplement or replace speech.
Aided modelling	Adults use symbols/device selections themselves while communicating naturally.
Communication passport	A positive, individual profile describing how someone communicates and how others can help.
Co-regulation	Support from a trusted other and accessible environment during intense emotion or sensory load.
EHC plan / EHCP	Education, health and care plan, specifying assessed needs and provision under English SEND law.
Nonspeaking / minimally speaking	Descriptors of speech use, not intelligence or capacity to learn.
Object of reference	A real object that helps represent a forthcoming activity or situation.
Partner-assisted scanning	A communication partner presents choices sequentially; the pupil indicates selection in an agreed way.
PECS	Specific trademarked Picture Exchange Communication System protocol; not a generic term for picture cards.
SaLT / OT	Speech and language therapist / occupational therapist.
Stimming	Repetitive or patterned actions that may express enjoyment or help regulate sensation or emotion.
Visual support	A picture, photograph, timetable, symbol, object or text that supports understanding or expression.

SOURCES & FURTHER READING

Selected authoritative guidance for school practice; links checked during preparation in October 2026. These sources inform the pack. They do not validate or endorse the Four Pillars framework.

[1] NICE CG170: Autism spectrum disorder in under 19s: support and management (updated 2021)

www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg170/chapter/recommendations

[2] RCSLT: Augmentative and alternative communication guidance

www.rcslt.org/members/clinical-guidance/augmentative-and-alternative-communic...

[3] ASHA: Augmentative and alternative communication - Practice Portal

www.asha.org/practice-portal/professional-issues/augmentative-and-alternative...

[4] National Autistic Society: Speech and language therapy in specialist schools

www.autism.org.uk/learn/knowledge-hub/professional-practice/speech-therapy

[5] Autism Education Trust: Progression Framework overview and resources

www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/training/progression-framework-2

[6] NHS: Supporting an autistic child

www.nhs.uk/conditions/autism/supporting-a-child/

[7] TEACCH: Tip 1 - Visual schedules

teacch.com/resources/teacch-tips/english/1-visual-schedule/

[8] DfE: SEND code of practice 0 to 25 years

www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-code-of-practice-0-to-25

SOURCES & FURTHER READING

Selected authoritative guidance for school practice; links checked during preparation in October 2026. These sources inform the pack. They do not validate or endorse the Four Pillars framework.

[9] Pyramid Educational Consultants UK: PECS intellectual property

pecs-unitedkingdom.com/intellectual-property/

[10] PECS UK: Description of the Picture Exchange Communication System

pecs-unitedkingdom.com/pecs/

[11] DfE: Keeping children safe in education 2026

www.gov.uk/government/publications/keeping-children-safe-in-education--2

[12] DfE: Restrictive interventions including reasonable force guidance (effective Apr 2026)

www.gov.uk/government/publications/use-of-reasonable-force-in-schools

[13] UK Government: Disability rights and reasonable adjustments in education

www.gov.uk/rights-disabled-person/education-rights

[14] NHS England: Dental pain communication resources for autistic children

www.england.nhs.uk/publication/clinical-standard-oral-healthcare-for-autistic...

[15] DfE and DHSC: Reducing the need for restraint and restrictive intervention

www.gov.uk/government/publications/reducing-the-need-for-restraint-and-restri...

EVERY CHILD HAS A WAY TO COMMUNICATE.

OUR RESPONSIBILITY IS TO FIND IT -

AND TO RESPECT IT.

BRIAN'S | WAVES | CIRCLES | BRIDGES

The Tom Tom Way invites schools to look beyond surface behaviour: to offer language for inner experiences, notice sensory and emotional Waves, make safe Circles predictable and create Bridges through communication and shared interests.

Created by Counsellor Tomass J. Wood.
Tom Tom Universe | www.tomtomuniverse.co.uk

This resource is intended for school review and appropriately supported implementation. Individual AAC provision and safeguarding requirements take precedence. Four Pillars is a developing educational approach; its efficacy has not been independently established.

VERSION 1.0 / OCTOBER 2026 / ENGLAND SCHOOL CONTEXT