



Independent Autism Advice Limited

Offering knowledge, understanding and practical advice with flexibility and patience

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Objects of Reference

What are 'objects of reference'?

This is a term describing objects being used in a systematic way for communication. Like words, texts, symbols and signs, objects can be used to represent people, places, activities, events, ideas, etc.

Easiest to understand



Hardest to understand

Such objects could be:

- **A real object**, relating directly to an activity or place, such as a cup to represent drink



or fork for lunch;



- **A related object**, such as a scarf representing a particular adult or a toy representing a pet dog;



a duck used to show bath time



- **A model or miniature object**, such as a toy carrot to represent snack time



or a toy bed for bedtime;



- **Part of an object**, relating to the activity/event/person it represents, such as a piece of the carpet for circle time;



- **A shared feature**, such as a piece of astro turf for playtime;



- **A representative/abstract object**, not linked to the activity/person/item may be used, such as a ball to indicate change or something new.



Objects should be chosen that are meaningful to individuals. It is necessary to observe levels of understanding and use of objects. Care needs to be taken when considering the object to prevent confusion with another activity/person/item/place.

Why use Objects of Reference for communication?

Objects are a powerful and concrete way of representing words and meaning for individuals in the early developmental stages of communication and social understanding. It is a form of communication that can be particularly helpful when supporting individuals who do not recognise and understand signs, symbols or photographs.

Objects of reference can be used to:

- Provide a concrete link, or bridge, between a word, sign, or symbol, such as pairing the symbol, word or photograph to the object;
- Help to recognise the start of an activity and develop an understanding of transitions, such as knowing when something is going to happen;
- Indicate sequences, or timetables, such as showing the activities for the morning, afternoon, or whole day;
- Encourage the individual to initiate communication and make requests;
- Help with making informed and meaningful choices, listening to the 'voice' of the individual.

When creating objects of reference, you may wish to use key ring hoops, Velcro or a glue gun, for connecting the object to the word/symbol. If Velcro is used, this enables the object to be secured on 'Now' and 'Next', or simple choice boards.

How do I use objects of reference?

Begin using the objects in a natural way, such as for going to the toilet, having a drink, snack or at meal and bath times. This means that the use of the object will be reinforced by the familiar routine and natural cues. It is very important that the same objects of reference are used consistently by all people working with the individual.

Try to:

- Show the relationship between the object and the activity/person/place, this could be showing the object in context, allowing the individual to touch and hold it;
- Use verbal prompts and gestures to reinforce the use and meaning of the object, as you would do with signing and other forms of enhanced communication, e.g. giving the object for 'play', saying, "time for play" and signing 'play';
- Start immediately after using the object, e.g. going outside for play time;
- Show when use of the object has ended, such as signing and saying, "play finished", putting the object away in a specific place, e.g. hanging it up by the door, or placing it in a finished tray.

Starting with one object of reference for a very familiar activity/place/person might show how effective this form of communication is for the individual and can be increased at an appropriate pace.

