

Visual communication systems: using signs and symbols

Why use signs and symbols?

Signs and symbols support spoken language and help develop communication, language and literacy skills. When you speak to a child with communication difficulties, whether or not he understands will depend on the context in which the statement was made, the tone of voice in which it was said, and non-verbal communication cues, such as body language and gestures. If a teacher says 'Line up', and the children all stand up and go to line up, the child will follow, as this is a routine that is repeated several times a day. If a mother goes to her child, points to his feet and says 'Get your shoes', he will run and get his shoes because his mother has pointed to his feet. He knows he has to put his shoes on before they go out and he is very motivated to do what his mother's gesture intimates because he always enjoys going out.

A child with communication and language delays and/or difficulties may understand and pick up on contextual cues because they have got used to the routine, and they know what will happen, because it is part of a routine. However, this does not mean that the child has actually understood the verbal instruction, or the reason for doing what they are asked. A child will line up with others in the class, but his ideas of where they are going might be based on previous knowledge of familiar routines. He may think it is dinnertime and then be very distressed when he finds himself in an assembly. Some other communication system is essential in order to help children who may have communication and/or learning difficulties understand what is going to happen and to support the spoken word.

Children also need to be able to understand that most activities have a beginning, middle, and end. They also need to learn that we need to complete certain activities so that we can move on to the next activity. Some children need support in focusing upon one activity or stimuli.

The use of signs and symbols can help support the learning of children who have the following difficulties:

1. communication, for example children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD).
2. attention, for example children with Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD).
3. co-ordinating and understanding sequences of events or thoughts, for example children with developmental dyspraxia.
4. language, for example children who have pronunciation difficulties, or limited language abilities, for example due to a hearing impairment.

Many children with communication and language difficulties have difficulty reading body language and facial expressions and often have poor eye-contact, so looking at a person when they are speaking can be difficult for them. For this reason, it is usually easier to use symbols to support language and teach communication skills. Signs and gestures can also be used to emphasise communication, but needs to be used appropriately, for example to develop language skills in sign language for children who are deaf or hearing impaired.

Using symbols

Symbols are line drawings with written words at the bottom. They can be used to support literacy skills as well as language skills.

Very often children with language delay have good visual awareness, for example children with ASD. Symbols are therefore a good choice if we wish to develop the communication abilities of a child with language delay.

Symbols can be used to support written information for children with poor literacy skills. For young children who are good readers, symbols help to clarify the meaning of written information and make it easier to understand.

Children with fairly good language skills but poor literacy skills find symbols give them confidence in reading so that they begin to have more success in reading words.

Further reading:

Hannah, L. (2001). *Teaching young children with autistic spectrum disorders to learn: a practical guide for parents and staff in mainstream schools and nurseries*. London: The National Autistic Society.