

Setting Up an Object Symbol System



Object symbols are used to **represent specific items, events, and activities**, by children who find it difficult to understand photographs, words, and signs. Object symbols can be made using real life objects or parts of objects (“remnants”). Object symbols can be used to inform children about a change in their daily activities (as you would with a visual schedule) or be used expressively for requesting.

An object symbol **must be meaningful** (or become meaningful through teaching) for the child that will use it. That is, when setting up an object symbol system, observe and **consider what objects or sensations the child associates** with each activity, item, or event. From your observations and knowledge of the child, choose an object symbol that they will most easily relate to each activity being represented.

Following are the steps to setting up and using an object symbol system. At the end of this handout, there is also a list of **suggestions** for items that may be suitable to use as object symbols for various activities. Remember, though, each **individual child** will associate different items with different activities. What may be suitable for one child, may not suit another.

- 1) Choosing and collecting object symbols** – Object symbols need to be chosen carefully for each child to work out which object symbols will **best suit** them. This would include what they would relate to best, as well as what would provide **appropriate sensory feedback** (e.g. tactile feedback, visual appeal, objects that make sounds). Determine which items/activities in the child’s **routine** need to be represented. This would include activities or items the child used/is involved in regularly and should include preferred or special activities or items. **Collect relevant object and items** for the object symbols. You will probably find them in a variety of places (e.g. packaging from household items, small items from the supermarket or bargain shops, spare items around the house, or available in the community.)



- 2) Set up and storage** - Where possible objects should be mounted on cardboard with Velcro™ or Contact with the word of the item or activity written on the bottom. This ensures that everyone using the objects realises they are for communication purposes and ensures everyone is using the same key word with the object.

Object symbols generally need to be stored in a **practical, easy to access** way. Make sure the object symbols are in a place where you can pull them out whenever needed quickly and easily. You may like to set up an “object symbol box” or container, where they can be stored without being damaged.

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- 3) **Access and Presentation – Determine how the child will access the object symbols.** Will they pick them up with their hands? Will they point to them with their finger? Will they use their eye gaze to indicate the preferred choice? This will depend on what is easiest for them.
- 4) **Purpose – What will the object symbols be used for?** Initially, they will most likely be used to inform a child that an activity or event is about to happen, this will also help them learn the association between the object symbol and the item or event. Before each activity show, child the object and help them touch/feel it. Say to child, “It’s time for X”

It is important that the objects be used consistently so that child learns to make the association between the activity/event and the object.

Note the child's reaction when given the object so that you can monitor their reactions over time – Are they starting to anticipate the activity? Do they show excitement if given the object for an activity they like?

The object symbols can also be used for requesting. Present two or more object symbols to the child and encourage them to indicate which one they would like. Ensure their choice is always available; ensure it is given immediately so the connection between the object symbol and activity can be learnt.

- 5) **Instruction for others** – To assist others to use object symbols with the child most effectively, make sure you include some simple instructions with the system. This could be in the form of a “Book About Me” and could include:
- An **introduction** with the child’s name and an invitation to communicate
 - A brief description of **why** the child uses the object symbols
 - **Simple instructions** on how to present object symbols to the child, how to interpret their response, and how to respond.

Examples of Object Symbols

Activity/Event/items	Suggested Object Symbols
Having a bath/shower	Soap, piece of towelling (to represent washer or towel), bath sponge, bath toy, shower cap
Brushing teeth	Toothbrush, toothpaste container
Washing hands	Soap, piece of towelling
Toilet	Belt buckle (for potty chair), toilet roll, nappy
Mealtime	Piece of cutlery, bib, plate,
Drink	Copy of favourite cup, empty “popper” container, drink bottle, drinking straw
Getting dressed	piece of clothing
Going in the car	Seat belt buckle, piece of fabric like car seat cover,
Listening to music	pair of headphones, Piece of fabric from chair used whilst listening to music
Watching TV	Piece of fabric from chair used whilst watching TV,

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Activity/Event/items	Suggested Object Symbols
	miniature TV
Swimming	Piece of towelling, swimming costume, piece of swimming costume fabric, goggles, swimming cap
Fast food restaurant (e.g. McDonalds)	Food wrapper, replica of hamburger/other food, menu
Computer	Computer mouse, mouse mat, switch
Bedtime	Piece of blanket, replica of stuffed toy or other comforter
Read a story	book, piece of fabric from chair sat in during story time
Play Doh	<i>Play Doh</i> /cookie cutter, empty <i>Play Doh</i> container, small rolling pin
Doll play	Piece of dolls clothing, doll, other relevant item associated with doll play
Car play	Toy car
Party	Party hat, party blower, streamer
Birthday	Birthday candle, miniature present
Going to the beach	Hat, sunscreen, section of beach towel, bucket/spade, sunglasses
Going to the park	Hat, piece of play equipment, sandshoe, ball (or other item used to play at the park)
Trampolining	Piece of trampoline fabric, trampoline spring
Favourite foods/drinks	Relevant food/drink wrappers or packaging, plastic representations or replica of food items

Remember that items need to be different so if a towel is chosen for 'bath time' then something different should be chosen for 'swimming'. Also, keep in mind, that miniatures (small versions of real objects) may not be representative of the activity. That is, a nappy or toilet roll would be more meaningful than a doll house toilet to indicate toilet.