

Objects of Reference

An Overview

Definition: "Objects of reference are objects which have meaning assigned to them. They **stand for something**, in much the same way as words do, whether spoken, signed or written." *Ockleford, A. (1994).

e.g. A person who cannot understand or is unable to express the idea of "swimming" through formal communication mediums such as speech, signing, writing or pointing to symbols/pictures, may be able to use the swimming hat, which they wear when swimming, to mean the same thing.

Objects of reference can represent:

- * **activities**, e.g. a drink is represented by a cup
 lunch is represented by a spoon
 swimming is represented by a swimming hat
 sensory room is represented by a fibro-optic strand.
- * **places**, e.g. home is represented by a key to the front door
 bedroom is represented by a herbal "sleep" pillow
- * **people** e.g. a wristband or bracelet may be used to signify a
 particular person

An object may be part of what it stands for:

e.g. going out in the minibus.....a seatbelt strap
trampolininga spring from a trampoline

or

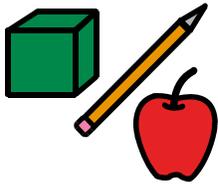
An object may not have any features in common with what it represents, but meaning is derived through association:

e.g. a particular bracelet.....going to visit mother

This type of association is usually used to convey abstract concepts.

Use objects of reference to:

- **aid memory** (We all use things to aid our memory – diaries, lists, timetables etc, and objects can act in the same way.
- **aid understanding** (We all need strategies to help us understand – such as writing something down, reading and re-reading. Objects give more information than a word or symbol or sign and so are easier to understand).
- **enable anticipation** of events
- **aid expression**, e.g. person goes to wall where objects of reference are stuck and removes the one representing "drink", indicating that he wants a drink.



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Some or all of the following senses may be involved:

vision

touch

smell

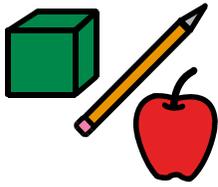
hear

Speech & Language Therapy - Introducing Objects Of Reference

- SELECT APPROPRIATE OBJECT/S. The object/s needs to represent something that happens frequently so that the person has more learning opportunities. Think about what it is about the activity that is **most meaningful to the service user. It may not be the most obvious thing to you!**

e.g. When in a Physiotherapy session, Kate is positioned so that she is looking up to the ceiling. On the ceiling is a mobile. Kate's object of reference for Physio is small wooden figure which she is aided to attach to the mobile as she is taken from her chair. When the session is finished Kate takes the figure of the mobile and puts it back in the drawer where her objects are kept.

- Begin on level one (most prompting - see below Hierarchy of Prompting)
- The object/s chosen should be kept in a place that is **accessible** to the service user, so that they become familiar with the object and have the opportunity to initiate. This may be a shelf or a bag or basket. **The objects should remain in that place until they are used for communication.** Some people take their bag of objects with them, wherever they go, and others may keep the objects at home and have duplicates at day services.
- Any interest by the service user in the object should be taken as have **communicative intent**. So if the service user picks up the object e.g. a cup, then follow this immediately by making a cup of tea (or whatever the cup represents). Do this even if you **KNOW** that the person would not normally choose this activity, as **mistaken selection can provide a valuable learning experience**.
- If the activity cannot be made available to the service user, then the object should not be accessible to the service user, as having access to the object, but not the activity that accompanies it, will give the service user inconsistent feedback and will be detrimental to the learning process.
- Aim to progress through the levels but bear in mind that some people will not progress to the point where they are spontaneously communicating. The service user may reach greater levels of independence with some objects and not others.
- However, continued and consistent use of objects of reference will support the service user's understanding, aid memory and provide a structure to their day.



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HIERARCHY OF PROMPTING - OBJECTS OF REFERENCE

LEVEL 1.

PERSON IS GIVEN THE OBJECT AND LED TO THE ACTIVITY

This is the easiest level where the service user only has to co-operate with their co-worker.

LEVEL 2.

PERSON IS GIVEN THE OBJECT AND GOES TO THE ACTIVITY WITH PROMPTING

This may be physical prompting, gestural prompting, verbal prompting or a combination of some or all of these. The aim would be to reduce the level of prompting needed until person moves on to....

LEVEL 3.

PERSON IS GIVEN THE OBJECT AND GOES TO THE ACTIVITY WITHOUT PROMPTING

A person able to do this shows that they have gained an understanding of the meaning that the object has, but they are not yet at the level of initiating.

OR

PERSON GOES TO THE OBJECT SPONTANEOUSLY THEN GOES TO THE ACTIVITY WITH PROMPTING

This shows that the person has some idea that the object has meaning and is able to initiate but is unable to make the connection to the activity without prompting.

LEVEL 4.

PERSON TAKES THE OBJECT, SPONTANEOUSLY AND GOES TO THE ACTIVITY WITHOUT PROMPTING

This person understands the communicative significance of the object and is able to initiate an interaction by taking the object to the activity.