

USING TANGIBLE SYMBOLS FOR COMMUNICATION

Students who are unable to speak may be able to learn how to communicate with tangible symbols.

What are tangible symbols?

Objects or pictures that stand for or represent something, including (from least to most abstract):

- Whole objects
- Parts of objects
- Miniature objects (often not useful, especially for students with a visual impairment)
- Associated objects (e.g. a towel to signify swimming)
- Textures or shapes
- Photographs
- Line drawings

Features of Tangible Symbols

- Permanent – don't need to be rely on auditory memory
- Readily accessible, so that the student can use them to communicate at any time. Symbols should therefore be as small and portable as possible.
- Can be manipulated
- Three dimensional symbols can be more easily discriminated by students with severe visual impairments
- Customized for each student, depending on what is meaningful for him/her

Hierarchy of Skills

1. Find out the student's preferences for different objects or activities. Determine how the student communicates preference. Also look for position bias when presented objects or activities. Develop a tangible symbol for each of these desired objects or activities.
2. Have the student touch the symbol at the beginning of engaging with the preferred object or activity. Talk about what the symbol means. Leave the symbol accessible as the student is engaged with the activity. Interrupt the student's involvement in the activity and teach him/her to touch the symbol in order to request more of the object or activity.
3. The student uses the symbol to make a request for a desired object or activity.

4. Add new symbols as the student consistently uses the existing symbol to have needs met.
5. Increase the size of the array of symbols presented at one time. Usually, the student starts out with using only one symbol at a time. After the student demonstrates understanding of two symbols, they can be presented together and the student can select one either to make a choice, or respond to a question or direction. Symbols can continue to be systematically added to the array.
6. Use symbols to sequence activities for daily schedules.
7. Increase the number of different contexts that the symbols are used in. For example, school, home, community, different times of day, etc.
8. Increase the number of communication functions. Expand to labeling, commenting, asking and answering questions, etc.



A spoon could be a tangible symbol for snack or lunch