

Using Objects of Reference – Information Sheet



What is an object of reference?

An object of reference is an object that is used to communicate a particular meaning, e.g. a bath duck to represent bath time, a set of keys to represent going out of the house, an object to represent a particular person visiting. Over time, if objects of reference are used consistently, a person can develop understanding of what is happening or going to happen.



When should I use objects of reference?

Objects of reference could be used in the following situations:

- To help a person who does not always understand words, signs, photographs or symbols, develop an understanding of what is happening, or going to happen.
- As help a person develop an understanding of a daily routine.
- To help support a person to make choices.



Tips for using objects of reference:

- To introduce objects of reference, it is useful to think about the daily routine of the person you want to support. As a starting point, choose key activities in the routine that happen frequently.
- Some ideas for routine activities and objects of reference:
 - Breakfast time: a certain bowl, an item that is always on the table at breakfast time.
 - Getting dressed: an item of clothing.
 - Leaving the house: keys, a bag, a model of a car.
 - Going to school: school bag, an item that is only used at school.
 - Going in the garden: a toy or item only used in the garden.
 - Bedtime: a cuddly toy, a set of pyjamas.
 - Bath time: a bath toy, a flannel, a shampoo bottle.



- Create a basket or box where you store all the chosen objects so they are easy to access when you need them.
- Write the word/attach a sticker on the object of reference with the word for the item – this is to make sure who ever uses the item, uses the same word each time.
- Think about the objects you choose – the object needs to be the same each time, e.g. the same red bowl to indicate it is breakfast time.
- For a person with visual impairment, use objects which have different textures and sounds.
- Use the object each time the activity associated with it is happening.
- Always say the word for what the object represents when you show the object, e.g. (show a plate) 'dinner time'. Encourage the person to explore the object by touching it.
- The use of objects will need to be modelled by all key communication partners consistently in different situations to allow the person to link understanding of what is happening with the object and the word that they hear.
- Start with a small number of objects, then as the person shows increased understanding and recognition, think about further objects you could add.
- Once the person is showing understanding of the objects associated with their routine and activities they enjoy, the objects can be used to provide a way for the person to make choices, e.g. (show flower) 'Garden or (show book) story time?'
- Seek advice from a speech and language therapist if you are unsure whether objects of reference would be suitable to use with the person you would like to support.

