

# The use of objects of reference as part of a multi-sensory communication system

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## What are objects of reference?

**Objects of reference** are objects which have special meanings assigned to them (Ockelford 1994).

Objects of reference were initially used with blind people and those with dual sensory impairment. Now also used with people with profound and multiple learning difficulties.

An object of reference is accessible to people who are blind, partially sighted and have a complex learning need by:

- providing information through touch
- being easier to interpret than pictures for those with visual perceptual problems
- being a concrete object linked to the symbolic words in language.
- remaining in place giving time to process.



## Choosing objects of reference

Objects of reference are chosen to have a specific meaning. There are no fixed objects which should be used but certain criteria are important:

- distinct tactile differences
- distinct visual differences
- relatively unique
- an association with the activity but not necessarily used.

## Uses of objects of reference

### To support receptive language

An object of reference is presented just before the associated activity to give extra tactile and/or visual information on what is about to happen.

### To support memory

Having a permanent tactile reference can act as a reminder.

### To communicate expressively

Objects of reference that are well known to the individual can be used to make requests/choice.

## The multi-sensory communication environment at RNIB Pears Centre for Specialist Learning

RNIB Pears Centre for Specialist Learning in the UK offers individually-tailored education, care and therapies to children and young people with multiple disabilities and complex health needs who are blind or partially sighted. Communication disability and challenging behaviours are key features of the young people's difficulties.

A multi-sensory communication policy has been written and implemented to include the range of communication strategies.

### Strategies include use of:

Objects of reference	Signing (visual and on-body)	Simple VOCAs
Symbols	Simplified verbal language	Music cues
Body language	Communication passports	Tone of voice/intonation
Object exchange	Picture exchange	Intensive interaction

Staff training and monitoring of the system is included to ensure consistency of implementation. The five good communication standards, set out by RCSLT (2013) will be used for monitoring staff's knowledge and use.

## Using objects of reference to remove barriers

- Visual impairment can be a barrier to using a symbol system. Where objects of reference are labelled with a symbol, this could act as a bridge to learning symbols. Learning the object of reference and linking it to the symbol may support learning of symbols, supporting transition to using a symbol system.
- Research funded by RNIB and SeeAbility (2011) suggests that there are children and adults with learning disabilities in the UK that have unidentified visual difficulties. Some of these may find accessing symbols difficult due to their visual difficulties. The use of objects of reference labelled with symbols may support these people to learn symbols.
- As objects of reference are individualised and created locally, their use could be easily implemented in low resource countries.

## Using objects of reference in an exchange system at RNIB Pears Centre

Using objects of reference to exchange is taught in four stages based on PECS (Bondy and Frost, 2002):

1. **How to communicate**, to learn to make a request by exchanging an object with a person.
2. **Objects have meaning**, to learn a small number of objects have different meanings.
3. **Discrimination**, to make an intentional choice between two or more objects.
4. **Distance**, to use a range of objects, kept in a specific container, to make a spontaneous request.

Some blind young people at RNIB Pears use this system effectively to make requests.

- In one-to-one time to choose an activity: play a music CD/sing a song/have a story read.
- By requesting the object container and selecting an object to make a request.



## The RNIB Pears Centre objects of reference system

A standard set of objects of reference is used, in three categories.

**Activities:** swimming, swing, a fan, go for a walk, go in the car

**Places:** residential bungalow, school, and rooms in school

**Lessons:** numeracy, music, science



There are more than 30 objects of reference available.

- Regular and consistent use is essential.
- Objects of reference can be presented on a black background board to give increased visual contrast, or as a "Now and Next" board.
- Objects of reference are individualised where necessary.

## References

- Emerson E and Robertson J, 2011. **The estimated prevalence of visual impairment among people with learning disabilities in the UK.** Improving Health and Lives Learning Disabilities Observatory
- Frost L and Bondy A, 2002. **The picture exchange communication system** Pyramid Educational Products Inc
- Ockelford A, 1994. **Objects of Reference.** London: RNIB
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