

Objects of reference

What are objects of reference?

Objects of reference are objects that represent a person, object, location (place) or event (activity). They can help children with communication problems and additional learning needs. They help children to learn what is happening in their day.

Understanding routines and knowing what is going to happen next are important skills for children's learning and communication.

Some children can begin to use objects of reference to make choices when they know what the objects mean.

Who do they help?

- Children who are early communicators
- Children who do not understand pictures, words and symbols yet
- Children with additional needs
- Children who have problems understanding the world around them
- Objects of reference are also used with adults.

Objects of reference can help children get ready to use pictures and symbols in the future. Other children, young people and adults use objects of reference as the main way to understand their world through their life. It is important to use objects of reference consistently at the right level for your child.



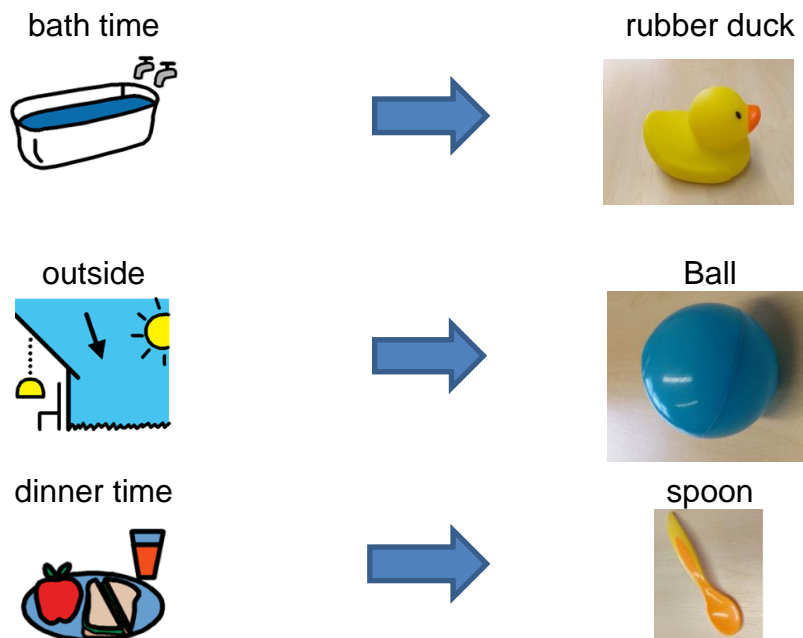
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What do they look like?

Objects of reference can be different for each child but can be common objects. It helps if the object of reference can be linked with the activity. For example:



Make sure the objects are safe for your child to hold. They need to be easy to carry. They need to be easy to clean or replace. Keep them in a bag so you can take out the one you need at the right time.

An object of reference should not be something you use in the activity. It is something which you show before it happens and put away when it is finished.

How do I use objects of reference with my child?

Use 3-5 objects of reference to start with so they are not too confusing. Pick things that you do every day with your child like going outside, mealtimes, seeing a favourite person, or a favourite activity.

You need to:

1. show the object of reference right before the activity
2. let your child hold it if they can
3. use a key word or phrase e.g. 'it's dinner time'
4. use a sign or touch cue if your child needs these
5. show them the person, object, place or activity
6. put the object of reference away when the activity is happening or has finished

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Do not worry if your child does not show interest in the object of reference, drops it or throws it. It takes time for children to learn what they mean.

Keep being consistent with showing the objects of reference before something happens. Make sure all people helping your child know to use them.

Helpful tips

As your child gets more used to the object of reference you can look for things they do to show they understand them. Things you can do are:

- Watch your child when you show them the object of reference. See if they look or move towards the activity
- Look at your child's communication. Are they showing you they know what is going to happen? Are they excited or happy?
- Gradually add more objects of reference to help your child know more about their routines and their day.

Read our 'objects of reference' guide for more information about how to help at each stage.

Information adapted from:

Call Scotland: Objects of reference, Ideas for Schools (2013)

Elklan: Communication builders for complex needs (2017)

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