TANGIBLE SYMBOLS

Definition

A communication system that includes three-dimensional symbols (objects) and two-dimensional symbols (photographs and drawings) to support communication and language development. Rowland and Schweigert (2000) include photos and drawings because they are permanent and can be touched and manipulated and may have perceptual link to their referents.

Purpose

To provide a receptive and expressive means of communication that allows reference to people, objects, places, concepts and events beyond the immediate context, and that fits the child's sensory and cognitive abilities and experiences.

Tactile Examples

To represent the concept of "drink" using a cup.

- Whole object: a cup.
- Parts of object: handle of a cup.
- Artificially associated object: piece of plastic.

Considerations

1. Tangible symbols that are tactile must be selected from the child's perspective.
2. Write the intended message clearly on the symbol to clarify the intent for the communication partner.
3. Consider the physical ability of the child to explore and manipulate tangible symbols.
4. Tangible symbols should be displayed to meet the child's learning needs, (e.g., in a calendar box, on a communication board, in a binder separated in categories, or on the place that the symbol represents).

Advantages

- Several symbols can be used together to compose a message.

- **Provide a continuum of communication options to children ranging from identical objects to line drawings.**
- **Make relatively low demands on the child's cognitive, memory, and representational skills. Only require recognition from an array of symbols that are permanent.**
- **Use of tangible symbols requires only a simple motor response from the child such as pointing, touching, picking up, extending, or looking at the symbol to make the message clear.**
- **The size of symbols may be reduced over time to make them more portable.**
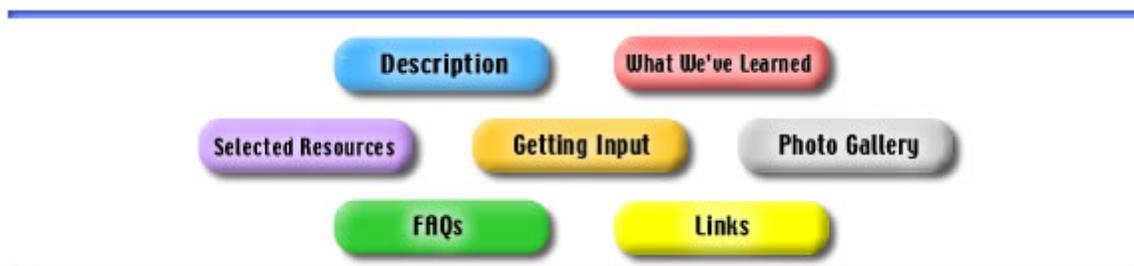
Disadvantages

- **Tangible symbols are not a conventional communication method and may not be understood by all communication partners or used consistently with the child.**
- **Artificially associated objects may not be easily understood and associated with referents by some children.**
- **The use of whole objects may not be portable.**

Source

Tangible Symbols represents a synthesis of information gained from Project SALUTE's focus groups, National Advisory Committee, staff activities, and a review of relevant literature such as the following bibliography.

Bibliography

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Description   What We've Learned

Selected Resources   Getting Input   Photo Gallery

FAQs   Links

IDEAs that Work