Using Symbols   to Support

Learning   and Communication

A   guidance   document   to   support

the   use   of   symbols   in   York

schools   and   settings

Regional
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COUNCIL

Using Symbols to Support Learning and Communication

Contents

This document was written in response to a previously circulated consultation document in which current practitioners raised the need for guidance on the use of symbols in all settings. It is part of a project led by the Specialist Teaching Team. It was written by Vicky Blackwell and Mary Griffiths in collaboration with symbol users, parents and professionals working in York schools and settings.

FOREWORD

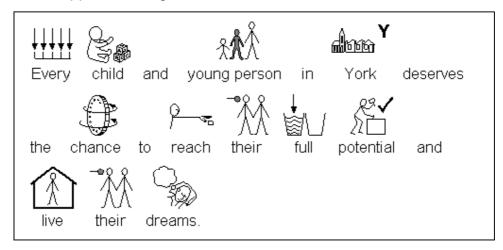The Children and Young People's Plan 2009-2012 states:

'Every child and young person in York deserves the chance to reach their full potential'.

This document has been produced as the result of a multi-agency working party and draws on the expertise of practitioners from health and education who use symbols to support communication and learning in York's schools and early years settings.

Symbols have been used to convey meaning since the earliest civilisations to present day. Cave men used pictures to tell their stories, hieroglyphs were used by the Ancient Egyptians in 3000BC and runes where used by the Vikings in the 8th century. We can see examples of symbols being used all around us in 21st century from road signs to instruction manuals.

We now live in a society where communication through the written and spoken word is highly valued. This can present challenges for some children and young people. Symbols enable children and young people to participate, make choices and offer opinion. This document and the consultation process, which preceded it, suggest that many children benefit from using symbols. This includes children without additional needs. Symbols can help all to support communication, independence and participation, literacy and learning, creativity and self-expression. It is essential that information is presented in a way that all readers can understand and use regardless of their age or ability.

Symbol usage is an important part of the Inclusion Agenda and I hope that this guidance will support practitioners in making appropriate and effective use of symbols to support learning and communication.

Eoin Rush
Assistant Director, Children and Families

January 2010

Acknowledgements

This document has been drawn up in consultation with a wide range of people who use symbols in their personal or professional lives within City of York. Their guidance and support has been invaluable.

Andy Roe	Residence Child Care Officer -The Glen
Anne Lumsdon	Teacher-in-Charge Enhanced Provision for Speech & Language, Haxby Road Primary School
Anna Barratt	Children's Society project worker
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Catherine Martin	Speech and Language Therapist-community
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Maggie Wilson	Inclusion Development teacher
Mary Griffiths	Specialist Teacher Physical Disability /Medical Needs
Melanie Feeney	Pre-school Support Teacher
Mick Mills	Educational Psychologist
Pippa Hutton	Speech and Language Therapist
Ruth Price	Symbol user
Sue Counter	Head of Inclusion, Manor School
Sue Madden	Senior Practitioner Deaf and Hearing Support
Sue Perutz	Senior Practitioner Physical Disability /Medical Needs
Susan Coulter	Team leader for Specialist Teaching Team
Suzanne Thurling	Speech and Language Therapist - Applefields
Vicky Blackwell	Specialist Teacher - Speech & Language/ Inclusion Development Teacher

We would also like to thank colleagues in schools, settings, health practitioner teams and local authority teams who have contributed to this project by providing guidance and encouragement.

1. Introduction

A symbol is a pictorial or diagrammatic representation of a word or concept. It has an acquired conventional significance and is widely used in education to support learning and communication.

Aims
The aims of this document are to:

- provide guidance for the use of symbols and a clear rationale to apply when choosing symbols for the first time
- encourage the standardisation of the use of symbols within individual settings, for individual users (in the case of split placement) and across the authority
- discuss the proposed progression in the use of symbols within individual schools and over transition into different school settings
- raise awareness of symbols as part of national (Disability Discrimination Act) and local initiatives (Dyslexia Friendly Schools, Inclusion Award, Self Review Framework, School Access Checklist, Wave1 Resources, Pupil Participation guidance).

Outcomes
The outcomes of this document will be:

- an established use of symbols in all settings
- easier transition for pupils moving between settings
- informed choices on the use of symbols and appreciating importance of progression and standardisation
- sharing of resources between schools
- a bank of easy to use starter symbols.

National and local Initiatives
The Disability Discrimination Act 2005 (DDA) encourages organisations to make information accessible to users. The use of symbols can:
- help as a visual aid to understanding the meaning of words, this is beneficial to anyone who is not able to read and interpret text.
- help people with complex communication difficulties who use symbols to augment their communication. This can include the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) which must be introduced and monitored under the guidance of the child's speech and language therapist.
- assist children and young people with autistic spectrum condition who require a clear visual aid for communication and understanding.
- support the view that a multi-sensory approach to teaching and learning encompasses the needs of all learners. Children and young people may have symbols offered as a visual reinforcement of information which could be offered in other ways such as speech or text. In a mainstream classroom environment symbols will assist visual learners and offer 'another way in.'

The use of symbols is promoted throughout CYC evaluation and review guidance. These include the Self-Review Framework, School Access Checklist, Inclusion Award, Dyslexia Friendly Schools file. Symbols are also currently offered in Local Authority resource packages such as the ASC guidance, and Wave 1 Resource file. The Pupil Participation literature "Listen to me" is supported by symbols and guidance in using the leaflets promotes using symbols where appropriate.

2. Which symbol set shall I choose?

It is important when choosing a symbol set for the first time, that an informed decision is made. This will require new users to be aware of:

1. CYC advice on standardisation of symbols
2. Progression of symbols
3. Symbol sets available
4. Individual pupil needs
5. Transition between and within settings
6. Dual placement

This will inform best practice and ensure individual pupil needs are met.

2.1. Symbol sets available
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Widgit Literacy Symbols (WLS)
Widgit Literacy symbols are designed by the company Widgit. They are offered as standard on the software programmes "Communicate: in Print" and Communicate: SymWriter.

WLS are based on a monochrome line drawing symbol set called Rebus symbols and have been developed to include colour. Communicate: in Print is a desktop publishing programme which can be used for making teaching resources. Communicate: SymWriter is a symbolised word processing package.

These symbols were designed to support the development of literacy and access to the curriculum. They are also widely used to support communication and social independence skills. They are made of simple line drawings and follow a schematic structure.

house   school   butchers

 Symbols are easily recognisable. They can be offered as either monochrome or coloured sets. New curriculum symbols are regularly added. Currently there are over 10,000 graphics covering a vocabulary of over 45,000 words. Online resources are available from http://www.widgit.com
Picture Communication Symbols (PCS) Picture Communication Symbols are designed by the company Mayer-Johnson and are offered as standard in

the software programme Boardmaker. This programme facilitates the production of communication boards, books and overlays.

Picture Communication symbols were developed to support communication. They are pictorial and are available in monochrome or colour. Currently there are 9,000 graphics supporting a vocabulary of 18,000 words. Grids for specific voice output communication aids (VOCAs) are provided on http://www.mayer-johnson.com

Makaton

Makaton was developed to supplement its signing system. It is similar to PCS and is primarily used alongside signage. It is most often used in early years settings for pupils with communication difficulties who use the Makaton signing system. This symbol set offers 9,800 graphics supporting a vocabulary of 16,000 words.
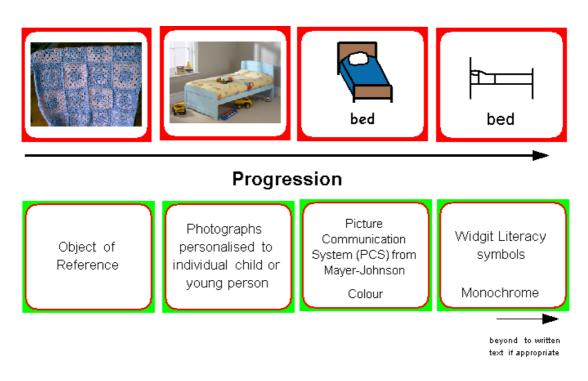
> **Both PCS and Makaton symbols can be imported into the Widgit Communicate: in Print software package to provide a flexible and comprehensive choice of symbols.**

Other

Free internet resources are widely available and have been adopted in many settings. However, these resources have no schematic structure, are not editable and therefore may not be inclusive for all pupils' needs.

Progression of symbols
(see appendix 1: Demonstrating progression in the use of symbol supported learning)

Progression

beyond to written text if appropriate

Symbols need to be taught and introduced gradually to children and young people. The diagram shows the progression of symbol usage as a child develops. For some children the use of symbols may be too difficult, in which case the pupil may use objects of reference or photographs.

Objects of reference

These are the first visual aid a child may use and should be personal to the child. A real object is used to represent a place or an activity eg a blanket may be used to say that it is bedtime.

Photographs

Photographs are the earliest use of symbols. They should be personalised to an individual child eg a child's own school, car etc and should have plain, uncluttered backgrounds.
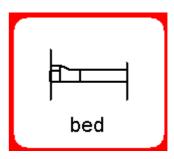
PCS

Coloured PCS is pictorial and therefore easy to read. These symbols are considered to be an intermediary step between photographs and more conceptual symbols.

Widgit literacy Symbols

Widgit literacy Symbols offered in black and white should be the last symbols used before writing, if this is appropriate. These monochrome, highly stylised and conceptual units are considered to be age appropriate for secondary school age pupils.

2.3 Standardisation of symbols

It is generally considered good practice not to interchange between symbol sets for any individual user. However, occasionally the limitations of the symbol set or the symbol choices offered may require the practitioner to resort to importing a single symbol from an alternative symbol set.

An ideal situation would be where a symbol user could move freely within and between settings and expect to find the same symbol set offered to support learning.

2.4 Individual Child or Young Person's Needs

Symbols may be personalised for any user. The following may be taken into account after considering progression and standardisation as above. This may involve using:
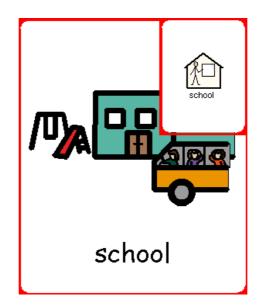
- a different symbol set to the standardised option available. For example a child with communication difficulties in early years who uses Makaton signing may benefit from Makaton symbols.
- a symbol set which does not correspond to the progression diagram but is in line with the child or young person's stage of development.
- symbol colour (monochrome or colour) which does not correspond to the standardisation suggested but supports individual need. For example although the progression advocates colour for primary and monochrome for secondary, some pupils with a communication impairment, autistic spectrum condition or visual impairment may prefer monochrome throughout.

- an alternative background colour to denote teacher instruction or pupil choice. For example pink to represent teacher instruction and white to denote pupil choice.
- enlarged symbols or objects of reference for pupils with a visual impairment.

2.5 Symbols at Transition

Practitioners should consider whether transition to another setting should involve the introduction of another symbol set. (See individual pupil need) If so it is good practice to introduce a pupil to a new symbol set gradually before transition. This can be done by offering the familiar symbol (eg PCS at primary) with the new symbol (Widgit Literacy Symbols for secondary) simultaneously.
The new symbol is initially smaller then the familiar symbol and eventually the familiar symbol is smaller as the new symbol becomes more embedded.

Transition teaching should take account of symbol standardisation and progression and also the symbol set predominantly offered in the new setting.

2.6 Dual Placements

Many children and young people in York have dual placements in either a special school or enhanced provision and a mainstream school. A standardised approach to the use of symbols across settings would support this arrangement. The 'home school' may offer advice on how any individual child uses symbols to support learning in that setting. This can be done by providing a communication passport which describes a child or young person's personal symbol use. The 'host' school should endeavour to mirror the arrangement of the 'home school' . Resources may be shared across settings.

3. Working with symbols

3.1 Introducing symbols

Symbols should be introduced and taught gradually as with any new vocabulary. Although some symbols are easily recognisable, others are more abstract. Some symbols in Widgit are defined within a schematic structure and will, therefore, require more structured teaching.
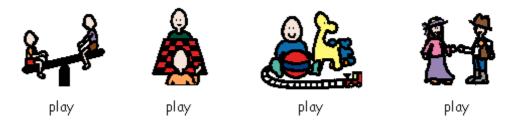

3.2 Symbol usage in the classroom

An inclusive classroom will support all pupils and adopt multi-sensory approaches to teaching and learning. Symbol usage will be an integral part of this approach.

- Visual learners will particularly benefit from having the environment labelled in symbols. This may include classrooms and items within the classroom, including displays, equipment and resources.
- Many schools and settings already offer an interactive visual timetable. This shows the activities planned throughout the day as symbols and a 'finished' envelope at the bottom. As each activity is completed it is removed (Velcro) and placed in the 'finished' envelope. Visual learners benefit from seeing only the remaining activities and the day getting shorter! Ideally this timetable should be displayed from left to right.
- Teacher instructions can be reinforced for all learners by using symbolised task cards.
- Some pupils benefit from individual task strips which sequence tasks for completion. These can be removed or crossed off on completion of each stage.
- Pupils with behavioural difficulties and/or pupils with Autistic Spectrum Condition would benefit from visual prompts to consolidate understanding and to promote positive behaviour. These can be symbolised.
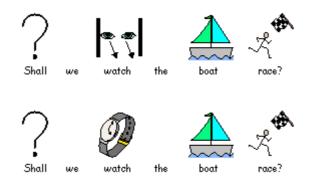
3.3 Some basic rules

- Text should be placed below the symbol, using 'Comic Sans' with Picture Communication Symbols and 'Arial' with Widgit Literacy Symbols.

- Only symbolise keywords that convey meaning, avoiding cluttered symbolised text with words such as "a", "the" or "but."
- A word may have more than one symbol in any symbol set. Choose the symbol most appropriate and be consistent.

- Symbol readers may not read punctuation so this must be achieved through layout. Allow one sentence per line if possible. If this is not possible break at a natural place eg and.
- Check the text is readable. Are the key concepts symbolised and are appropriate symbols used? Cover the text before you print and check for readability.

- Do not mix symbol sets.
- Laminate your symbols for durability. Note: use heavy duty laminating pouches.
- Ensure that Velcro™ is used consistently throughout the setting. Hooks on the symbol and pad on the target eg timetable, task card, display.
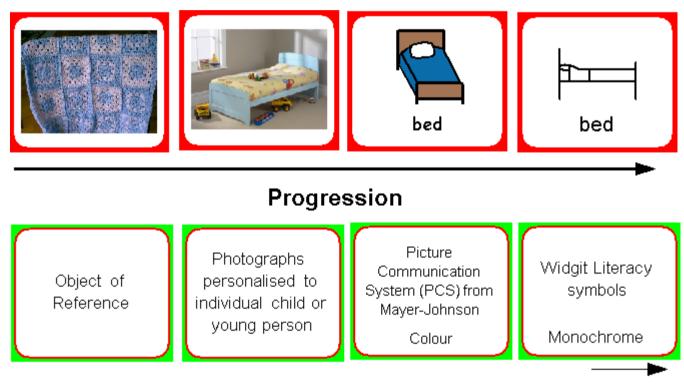
4. Summary of recommendations

The following recommendations should be taken into consideration when using symbols to support communication and learning:

- **The chosen symbol set should be standardised throughout the setting.**

- **Symbol choice should adhere to the progression chart above eg object, photograph, picture, symbols.**

- **In early years and primary school settings the recommended symbol set is Picture Communication Symbols in colour.**

- **In the secondary school settings the recommended symbol set is monochrome Widgit Literacy Symbols.**

- **Consideration should be given to an individual pupil's needs and any recommendations from the Speech and Language Therapist or Specialist Teachers.**

5. Appendix

Demonstrating Progression in the use of Symbol Supported Learning

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Progression

| Object of Reference | Photographs personalised to individual child or young person | Picture Communication System (PCS) from Mayer-Johnson Colour | Widgit Literacy symbols Monochrome |

beyond to written text if appropriate