York and Scarborough Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

Children's Therapy Team

Speech and Language Therapy Advice Sheet

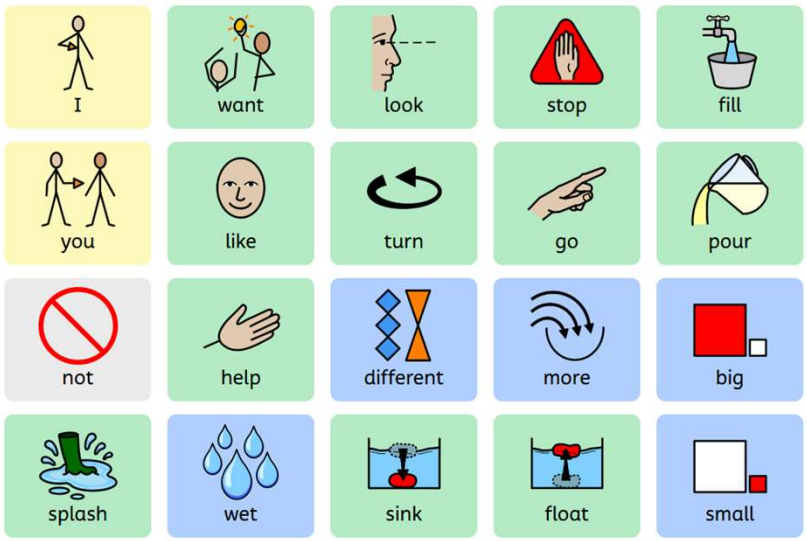
Using a Communication Board

What are 'communication boards'?
A communication board is a single page with lots of different words on it. These are usually represented by symbols. Some communication boards have just a few symbols on them, and some have lots – it depends on how much language the child needs.

What is a 'topic board'?
Some communication boards only have core words on them (words that can be used in lots of different situations and places). This is called a 'core word board'*.

A **topic board** is a communication board with words on it that are related to a specific activity or topic. For example, you could have one around water play, reading a story, playing with cars, or eating.

Each board would have a different combination of words that relate to that topic. Let's look at 'water play' as an example.



The board has words that are very specific to water play, such as 'splash', 'wet', 'sink', 'float', 'pour' and 'fill'.

It also has words 'core words' that can be used with water play but also in other activities. For example, 'help', 'more' and 'go'.

*For more information about core words, please see our 'core words' advice sheet.

How to introduce communication boards

We introduce symbols by **modelling** them. This means pointing to a symbols that matches what you are saying and the situation you are in. You don't have to point to every word you say. For example, in a water play activity, you might say things like 'let's **splash** the water' or 'that's a **big** boat!'.

Top tips on introducing communication boards:

1. **Choose communication boards related to your child's interests.** Think about what language is important to them, and what messages they would like to share.
2. **Create opportunities to use them.**
3. **Model without putting pressure on the child to use it.** Children learn by watching and listening, you don not need to test them or ask them to find symbols.
4. **Model it for lots of different types of messages.** For example, to ask for something, to make a comment, protest, share an opinion, ask a question or express feelings.
5. **Give thoughtful pauses.** Once you have modelled a symbol, pause and give the child time to process and respond if they want to. If they don't respond, that's okay! Just keep modelling.
6. **Keep responding to all the ways your child communicates**, not just symbols (e.g. pointing, gesture, facial expressions, using their voice for sounds or words).
7. **Have fun** and explore the language together!

Further resources

You can download example communication boards from our website, or from:

- https://acecentre.org.uk/resources/all?category=symbol-charts
- https://hub.thinksmartbox.com/topic/printable-boards-super-core-learning/
- https://www.fluentaac.com/communication-boards

To learn more about how to use symbols, you can attend our training 'Getting started with symbols'. The link to book on to this is on our website (below).

If you have tried using these strategies and you are still concerned about the impact of your child's communication differences, you can:

- Look on our website for further information and advice: York and Scarborough Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust - Speech and language therapy (yorkhospitals.nhs.uk)
- Contact us via our 'Request for Help' line – see our website for further details