

What are Objects of Reference and how can they improve communication?

Building Relationships, Communicating Better

Objects of reference are tangible items used to represent specific people, activities, places, or events. They are tools to aid understanding and communication, particularly for people with learning disabilities who may have additional difficulties with communicating with others.

Using objects of reference in a meaningful and consistent way helps to strengthen relationships, improve communication

and self-advocacy by providing a concrete way to represent abstract concepts, ideas and suggestions.

Objects of reference can help to reduce anxiety and support people to develop independence skills, make choices and take decisions about their lives.

Key Principles

- 1 Definition:**
 Objects of reference are tangible items used to represent people, activities, places, or events. They help people, particularly those with communication difficulties, to understand and engage with their environment.
- 2 Communication Aid:**
 These objects serve as a bridge to facilitate understanding and communication for people who might find abstract concepts and verbal language challenging.
- 3 Consistency:**
 It's essential to use the same object consistently for the same activity or concept to help the person form a reliable association with the object and improve communication.
- 4 Person-centred:**
 The chosen objects should be meaningful and relevant to the individual's experiences and preferences to maximise their effectiveness.
- 5 Multisensory Engagement:**
 Objects of reference should appeal to multiple senses (sight, touch, smell, etc.) to reinforce their meaning and help the people we support to remember them.

Benefits

- **Improve Understanding:** They provide concrete cues, helping individuals understand activities and concepts. They make abstract concepts more concrete, helping individuals comprehend what is about to happen or what is being communicated.
- **Provide Consistent Cues:** Consistent use of objects creates predictable routines, aiding understanding.
- **Support Memory:** Objects serve as physical reminders, helping recall information or events.
- **Facilitate Choice, Expression and Independence:** They enable individuals to make choices and express preferences. Objects help individuals initiate and complete tasks independently and can empower individuals to make choices and express their needs more independently.
- **Reduce Anxiety:** Clear, concrete information from objects reduces anxiety by making activities predictable. By providing a clear and consistent way to understand their environment, objects of reference can reduce anxiety and increase predictability for individuals.
- **Provide Multi-sensory Engagement:** Engaging multiple senses reinforces understanding and communication.
- **Cultural and Personal Relevance:** Objects can be personalised, making communication more meaningful.
- **Improved Communication:** They offer an alternative means of communication for those who struggle with verbal language, fostering better interaction and engagement.
- **Support in Transitions:** They can be particularly useful in helping individuals transition between activities or settings, making these changes smoother and less stressful.

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Staff Role



Selection and Preparation

Responsible for selecting appropriate objects that are meaningful and relevant to the individual. They should prepare these objects for use in various activities and routines.



Consistency in Use

Using objects consistently to ensure the individual forms strong associations between the object and its meaning.



Training and Awareness

Staff need to be trained in how to effectively use objects of reference and understand their importance. They should also be aware of everyone's specific needs and preferences.



Observation and Feedback

Regular observation of the persons responses to the objects is crucial. Staff should provide feedback and make necessary adjustments to improve the effectiveness of the objects of reference.



Communication with Family and Other Professionals

Communicating with family members and other professionals to ensure a cohesive approach and share insights about what works best for the individual.



Documentation

Keeping detailed records of the objects used, their intended meanings, and the individual's responses helps in refining the approach and to ensure consistency.

Examples of Objects of Reference

- **Toothbrush** for brushing teeth
- **Comb / hairbrush** for brushing hair
- **Cup** for drinking
- **Towel** for bath time
- **Soap bar** for washing hands
- **Spoon** for eating
- **Shoe** for going outside
- **Hat** for going out in the sun
- **Jacket** for cold weather
- **TV remote** for watching television
- **Miniature bus** for taking a bus journey
- **Picture** of a bed for bedtime

