

Speech and Language Therapy Department

Talking Mats

Talking Mats are used as a visual tool which can be used to support individuals to communicate about their preferences and make choices. It involves having a structured conversation with individuals using supports (such as photographs, objects or boardmaker symbols) and a mat where the visuals are placed.

For some people, it may take some time to be able to use Talking Mats. It may be a good idea to begin with general topics and easy conversations when first introducing the Talking Mat. For example, a conversation on tv shows or activities. Once someone has built up their understanding of the talking mat process, it may be able to be used for exploring views, feelings and making decisions.

According to Talking Mats (2021); here are some things to consider;

The Environment:

What does the person associate with the room/area being used? What typically happens here? What are the sensory demands in the room?

Be aware that sitting close to someone may add anxiety. Consider the position and proximity which works best for each individual. A side-by-side or perpendicular position can help to reduce the pressure on the person. Remember to ensure the mat is in front of the person. You do not have to sit at a table during the talking mat process.

The Relationship:

Who is the best person to communicate with this person? Do you know the person well enough to recognise signs of anxiety and distress?

Timing:

Is the timing of this mat a disruption to the person's established routine? Think about the duration of the session – some people may need breaks/ multiple sessions to avoid over-tiredness and/or if they have a short attention span.

Modelling:

Some people may not understand what is expected from them initially. Model other people doing talking mats. This demonstrates that although there is a positive and a negative side to the mat, this doesn't equate with 'right' or 'wrong'. Make sure there is exposure to other people doing Talking Mats without the pressure of the focus being on them. This may need to be done repeatedly and over time.

Level of Symbolic Understanding:

Which symbols does the person recognise and associate with the most? Does the person have previous experience with objects/pictures/photographs, board maker/ the written

word? Some people may find visuals distracting and concentrate more on their details. For example, sorting pictures according to colour rather than preference.

Accessibility:

Consider the person's method of accessing the mat and any adaptations which may be required. Do they have any physical difficulties which may make placing the options difficult? Do they have a visual impairment?

The Set Up

Some people may find the side by side talking mat as "right and wrong" and fearful of using it. You could separate the mats to different areas of the room to defer from the right and wrong appearance.

Allowing for change

You can take a picture of the finished product to act as the evidence from the conversation. It can allow the individual to have more time to process information and can also allow for change.

The talking mat can be arranged again following the image taken and allows the individual to make changes if they wish.

Ideas for Talking Mat topics:

- New activities to try
- TV programmes / movies
- Goals – can be used as part of My Life Meeting to document someone's wishes/goals for the year
- New foods to try



References

Talking Mats (2021) Working Towards Talking Mat Guidelines [online]

<https://www.talkingmats.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Working-Towards-TM-Guidelines-2021-Final.pdf>. [Accessed 08.02.2024]

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