Choosing an object of reference / signifier: Basic Steps

What follows is a basic quick guide to using objects of reference. Note though that you will have to adapt the guide at all stages to the needs of pupils. The italicised text may help to decide on practical steps to take.

Choose motivating contexts

1. Identify the activity

Observe the student across several activities (different times of day, different places). It may help to use a behavioural checklist. There are many other examples of this approach so if this one does not fit the bill we can discuss again.

Identify one activity the pupil likes particularly. It may be difficult to ascertain likes and dislikes. If so choose an activity that seems to have strong associations for the pupil.

2.Choose the object to be used as object of reference / signifier

Is there already one object clearly associated with the activity that the pupil likes? What? Often it is best to choose an object unique to the pupil's association with the activity. Discussion among staff will be needed.

Other points to look for – not essential but they help

- Is the chosen object unique to that activity? If not, could it be made unique? (perhaps it is not needed in other activities).

- Is it a size / weight / shape student can hold, so can be taken to activity? This may not be appropriate. Can student already distinguish it from among other objects? (perhaps becomes excited when sees or touches it).

- Does student seem already to anticipate that the object is associated with that activity? You will need to look for subtle cues in a pupil's behaviour and may want to use the behavioural checklist mentioned earlier.

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Create an association between object and activity

3. Introduce the object as an object of reference / signifier

Just before the student is due to begin the activity, draw attention to the object of reference. If student can hold it, place in hands, so can explore it for a short while. Say something like (or sign or both, whichever is used) "Let's go to the XXXX". It will help to accentuate the object, for example by squeezing mint toothpaste onto a toothbrush before using it for teeth brushing time.

Other points to look for

If, when you give the object, the student seems to anticipate the activity, say / sign something like "You'd like to do XXXX. Let's go and do it now". Go to place/begin the activity immediately.

The object of reference is present at the beginning and during the activity. You can attach it to the student with velcro , or in a little pouch round his/her neck, if this will be tolerated, so that he /she can keep seeing and/or feeling it in the location, throughout the activity.

4. End the activity

Once the activity is finished it is a good idea to indicate this to the student.

Options include:

Leaving the object of reference at the activity location and leaving. Say / sign "All finished. No more XXX. We're going now." as you take the object out of the student's hands / help put it down somewhere and leave.

Putting it in a 'finished box' that you could make out of a cardboard box or ice-cream carton. Then leave the activity minus the object of reference.

NB: you'll have to remember to retrieve it again later so that it can go back to its storage location ready for the next time that activity will be introduced.

5. Keep repeating the activity (next day or soon after) so the student's learning is reinforced

6. Gradually increase the mental distance' between the object of reference and the activity it refers to, so that it comes to stand for (symbolise) the activity rather than just being associated with it

On the first few occasions the object should be physically very close to the activity and also close in time (i.e. presented to the student immediately before the activity begins). To increase the 'mental distance' between object of reference and activity you need to increase two things:

- increase the distance of the pupil from the activity itself;

- increase the time between presenting the object and the activity beginning.

7. Introduce another object / activity

8. Try to introduce an element of social interaction to the use of objects

Once the student has understood what the object signifies, and after having held it for a moment, get the student to give the object to you (or someone else that's coming along) as part of the process. When the person is given it, they immediately say "Oh, we're going to do XXX" - and then give it back to the student. (You will need to prepare and cue the other person, so they know exactly what to say, and so that everyone says the same thing very consistently).

Try to get student to initiate use of Objects of Reference

9. Try to get student to actively initiate use of objects of reference instead of waiting passively to see what is happening to them next.

Once one or two associations are established, present the (one single) object of reference within view and within reach and say - "now where are we going?" Or, "I wonder what you want?" Pause for a long time, to give the student plenty time to eye point to/ point to /touch/pick up the object by him/herself. Once they indicate it, immediately reward them with lots of enthusiasm. "Oh great, yes! Lovely, mmmm, we're going to XXXX" "Let's go!" (And go, immediately) or "Oh, right, you want XXXX" "OK - here 's XXX".

Making choices

Contrary to what many think, the child using objects of reference 'expressively' to make choices is a late stage in the process. It can only be achieved once a firm association is established and the student is used to being expected to initiate.

10. Choosing from two options – much later on

Once the child knows two objects / associations firmly, you can try to introduce choicemaking. Start at a time/ situation where one particular activity is expected (but choose realistic options - you must be prepared to do the other possible choice too).

Present two known objects of reference within view/reach and say "well, it's time for XXXX" "Shall we go to XXXXX?" "Let's find XXXXX".

If necessary, at first 'model' the choice for the child by pushing the object for XXX forward and drawing the child's attention to that one rather than the other one. Repeat daily, but change the position of the objects about so they are not just always picking the one on the left (or whatever) and gradually put the two objects in equal positions so that it is a genuine straight choice between two equal options. (If in spite of prompting they pick the other one, at any time, you must do the activity they pick).

11. Extending Choices – later still

If they can make a meaningful, reliable choice from 2 items, you could try to extend to choice between 3 (or more, eventually).

12. Building Object Sequences (Symbol Sentences)

The highest point of achievement might be seen as the ability to sequence two or more objects in a sequence to represent a sequence of events. You need a velcro mounting strip/board and velcro backed objects for this.

At first you need to model the child's use, then gradually leave him/her to do it more independently.

For example, you could ask "what did we do this morning?" "We did music" (child selects music object and sticks it on left of board) then afterwards "we had a snack" (child selects snack and sticks it on next to music (moving left to right, ideally) "and afterwards we went to swimming " (child selects swimming object and sticks it on).

Then the child has a 'story' that he can take to another person who will be able to read it back, the same way. This is a powerful level of communication.