
Using Objects of Reference

Possible Problem Areas

What association is the child actually making between object and activity? Is it the one you want them to make, or...?

Example:

In one school the teacher used a photograph of their 'white room' to signify that the pupil was about to begin activities in that room. The pupil liked these activities, especially playing with a fibre optic tube in the room.

How it worked was that the teacher would go into the cupboard in the classroom and collect the photo, attach it to a communication apron or vest she wore and draw the pupil's attention to it (or sometimes hand it to the pupil). The pupil would then take the photo from the vest and go with the teacher to the white room. This procedure had been going on for several months.

The photo used to associate with the activity was fairly fuzzy and indistinct. The pupil's picture recognition abilities were questionable. However, it seemed that the pupil had associated the object of reference (photo of white room) with the activity (going into the room to play with the multisensory equipment).

But one day something happened to challenge staff's assumption that the pupil had learned the association between the object of reference and the activity it referred to.

Another member of staff went into the cupboard to collect a toy and handed it to the pupil. The pupil took the toy, walked to the teacher and presented it confidently, looking towards the white room door and apparently expecting that this was her usual 'ticket' to the white room. It turned out that the pupil had associated going to the multisensory room with someone (anyone) going into the cupboard and bringing out *anything*.

This anecdote illustrates an important point:

The pupil may actually learn an association that is completely different from the one intended. In this example, she did not think '*photo=white room*', she thought '*thing from cupboard*'= '*white room*'.



- This might be because of 'over-learning' or 'over-generalisation'. The photo no longer *stands for* the activity, but has become *part of* that activity. In other words, any part of the whole sequence of activities surrounding the cupboard and the photo, have become part of the activity of going to the white multisensory room.

How to avoid these difficulties? Moving forward with objects of reference

There are various ways to avoid this type of scenario.

- Plan to vary where the object of reference comes from/is displayed, from time to time, so that the association is held to the object of reference not to its storage location.
- Plan to change slightly the object of reference, or photo, symbol, or whatever, from time to time (while still referring to the same thing, place or activity), in order to move things forward.
- Remember that the aim of using objects of reference is not just for the child to get better at making the link between one particular thing and one particular activity (though that may be the first stage), but - ultimately - to help the child gradually develop a more general understanding of the concept of *representation* (i.e. that one thing can stand for, or mean another thing - in a variety of different contexts).

When and how to introduce change?

When and how best should changes be made to the photo, signifier, line drawing that stand for an activity?

Once success at the basic level of association is achieved and is fairly consistent, it is time to move on. A very important point to note is that success does not necessarily mean 10 times out of 10 or 5 out of 5 or whatever. It will depend on all sorts of things - other new objectives that are being introduced might mean it is too much to expect the pupil to learn a new link; if the child is enjoying the activity he or she might be motivated enough to allow a new association to be introduced.

BUT - it is vital not to introduce too many changes at the same time. Do not introduce new objects of reference at the same time as changing old ones.

How to change

You can:

- add new objects to refer to new activities.
- change some element of existing objects to refer to same activities.
- combine the two.

Here we suggest some changes that you might wish to introduce to the object of reference itself. This is designed to **keep the pupil on his or her toes - no complacency allowed!**

If using photographs you could:

- Use a photo taken from a slightly different angle.
- Change the size of the photo (or the size of the object / activity in the photo).
- Photograph a different object that is also associated with that same activity, for example, instead of always using a towel for swimming, use a bathing cap or a swimming costume.
- You might want to think of other ways of introducing change.

If using objects you could:

- Add a smell associated with the activity e.g. for swimming a couple of drops of chlorine (diluted!) could be added to a swimming towel.
- Use a different object also familiar to the pupil within that activity.
- Change one feature of the same object of reference e.g. instead of a blue towel use a red towel (if the pupil can see colours).