



# Tangible Symbols

by  
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### What are tangible symbols?

- They are tactile, representations of activities, objects, places, events, concepts or people, which are used for expressive and receptive communication.
- They are permanent in that they remain the same over each presentation.

- They can be held in the hand or physically transferred from place to place.
- They are usually made of whole objects or parts of objects attached to a background card.
- They can range in their level of abstraction.

### Who would benefit from using tangible symbols?

- Students with emerging language skills who are blind or visually impaired, with or without other disabilities, who are unable to use print, pictures symbols or Braille to support their expressive communication.
- Students who require a multi-sensory approach to language learning.

## Why do people use tangible symbols?

- To increase independent communication skills.
- To create a focal point for conversations.
- To access the curriculum.
- To support transition from pre-symbolic to symbolic communication.
- To provide a bridge for using more abstract symbols, such as speech, when possible.
- To create activity schedules.
- To support transitions between activities.
- To develop time concepts and sequencing skills.
- To develop early literacy and pre-braille skills.



## What are some of the language skills and concepts that can be accessed with tangible symbols?

- Greeting friends.
- Establishing joint attention.
- Taking turns and waiting for a turn.
- Requesting (toys, foods, songs, activities)
- Rejecting
- Labeling (objects, people, food, places, etc.)
- Identifying landmarks

- Indicating need states (hungry, thirsty, etc.)
- Stating feelings (happy, sad, bored, etc.)
- Understanding the daily routine.
- Learning how to express oneself and be heard by others
- Learning behavior regulation.

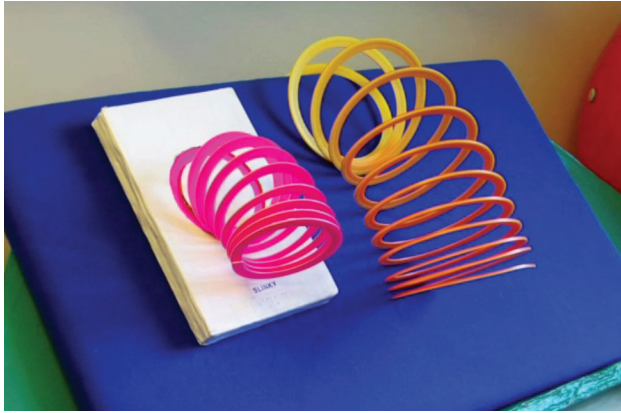


### How should tangible symbols be presented?

- Consistently
- Within routines
- With consistent language
- As part of a whole communication system
- By pairing symbols with what they are representing (person, place, activity)
- With print and Braille labels attached.

### What should be considered when developing tangible symbols for a student?

- The student's interests.
- The student's experience with the activities, etc., that the symbols are representing.
- The student's sensory needs or limitations and tactile preferences.
- The student's expressive and receptive language level.
- The student's visual impairment (field cut, color preference, etc.)
- The student's fine and gross motor skills



- The student's response mode (touching, pointing, eye gaze)

#### Further considerations:

- Level of abstraction of symbol being created. How closely does the symbol bear a resemblance to what it represents?

- Tactile saliency of the symbol. How easy is it to identify the symbol using only touch?
- Ease of replication. Are the materials used in making the symbol readily available and inexpensive or are they one-of-a-kind and difficult to find?
- Durability. Will the symbol survive frequent handling?

### Tips for Introducing Tangible Symbols

When beginning the process of introducing tangible symbols to a student for the first time, it is helpful to start by finding out what the student really likes, such as favorite songs, interactive games or preferred toys. A student is more likely to learn to identify a symbol representing a favorite game than one that represents a non-preferred activity.

Once a preference has been determined, pair a specific object with that game or song. For example, if the student likes the song "Shake Your Sillies Out" encourage him to hold and shake a small shaker while listening to the song. Make sure the object is available each time the student hears the song. Once the relationship has been established, place the object on a choice board and present it to the student before he hears the song. Have him place the object in a "finished box" when the song has ended.

After the student has developed an understanding of the relationship between the object and the song, make a tangible symbol that represents the song. In this example with the song "Shake Your Sillies Out" a tangible symbol could be created by attaching a small shaker to a card. Give the student time to explore the tangible symbol with the unattached object before playing the song. After this association has

been established, present the tangible symbol on the choice board before playing the song.

An important step in creating an association between a tangible symbol and a song or activity is to engage the student in that activity as soon as he touches or looks at the symbol. By doing this the student will learn that touching a specific symbol means gaining access to a favorite activity. When more symbols are introduced the student will learn that symbols represent a variety of activities, etc. He will eventually learn that touching symbols is an effective way to communicate choices and make requests.



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