

Children's Speech and Language Therapy Service

Communicating with Pictures or Symbols

Communicating with pictures?



Pictures or symbols can be used to help a child communicate their wants and needs.

This can help children who find it difficult to initiate communication and may also have limited spoken language.

Pictures and symbols can support with functional communication and develop spoken language.

Who can use pictures to communicate?



Pictures and symbols can be used with anyone who has communication needs. It has been shown to be effective in supporting children who might have a specific diagnosis including Autism, Downs Syndrome or Learning Disabilities.

How long will pictures and symbols be used?



Each child's journey is different.

For some children using pictures to communicate is a successful long term method of communication.

Some children start off with pictures and move on to using them alongside spoken language.

Some children may progress to using only speech as their main way of communicating.

Other children may use alternative systems of communication such as communication boards or communication technology.

Children's Speech and Language Therapy Service

What are the benefits of using pictures or symbols to communicate?



- It teaches the power of communication and develops spontaneous communication.
- It teaches a child to initiate communication with familiar adults and peers.
- It teaches functional communication so that the child can request what they need or want. This can help to reduce frustration when a child has difficulty communicating.
- Pictures are universal, therefore can be easily understood by anyone the child is trying to communicate with.
- It encourages the child to develop spoken language, as speech is modelled alongside every exchange.
- Pictures can be used alongside other approaches aiming to support the development of interaction and communication skills in children.

How to get started?



Speak to your child's Speech and Language Therapist, specialist teachers or your child's teacher who can support with using pictures or symbols to communicate.

Advice sheet reviewed in May 2025.

Next review due in May 2028.