

Using Talking Mats with individuals with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder – Things to consider

We know that people with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) can find Talking Mats a valuable tool.

- It allows processing time and communication without speech
- There are people with ASD who even create their own mats to think about issues.
- It can be a useful tool to develop Theory of Mind (awareness of others views)
- It acts as a thinking tool and supports decision making
- It supports expressing feelings

Some individuals with high functioning ASD may talk clearly and at length about their specialist interests, but struggle to find the basic words to talk about feelings, opinions, views, preferences, etc.

However certain aspects of ASD can mean some of the principles of Talking Mats are challenging and will need to be specifically taught, hence these adapted guidelines. The following factors have come from practitioners with experience, and are worth considering when introducing Talking Mats to people with ASD. It is not an exhaustive list and we are always happy to hear of ways which allow more people to learn to use Talking Mats effectively.

Things to consider

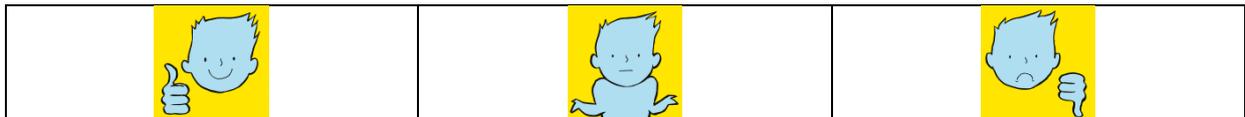
- **The Environment-** What does the thinker associate with the room being used? What typically happens here? What are the sensory demands in the room? Be aware that sitting beside the thinker may add to their anxiety. Consider the position and proximity which works best for each individual. Don't feel you have to sit at a table. An actual mat is not essential, - 2 trays or 2 areas in the room might work better. Consider a Talking Wall or an interactive white board.
 - **The Relationship-** Who is the best person to communicate with this thinker? Do you know the person well enough to recognise signs of anxiety and distress? Is the timing of this mat a disruption to established routine?
 - **Modelling** : The person with ASD may not understand what is expected from them initially. **Model** other people doing 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 Mats without the pressure of the focus being on them. This may need to be done repeatedly and over time.
 - **Introducing the mat:** Use symbol options that you know are definite triggers of positive and negative, to reinforce the learning of the top scale. Don't worry about sticking to one topic at this stage. You can use random items e.g. dogs, roundabouts, heavy metal music. Anything that has meaning for the person. You will need to consult with people who know the individual well. Don't use a topic that you want to use later to get the person's views, ie think of **teaching** items as different from **functional** items.
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Talking mats principles

The **Purpose** -Use a mat initially for practical reasons, e.g to give information about the sensory environment, and make sure any actions from the mat are explicit and immediate. An example is one boy was given ear defenders and started going to PE once he expressed he didn't like the noise in the hall. Food tastings are good as you can capture an immediate response. Also listening to different music. As long as it's meaningful for the person. Start small - 3 or 4 items .

The Top Scale -

Start with top scales that will have meaning for the person with ASD



like/not like or happy /not happy may not be the most concrete for that person. These concepts may need to be taught . If the mid point is difficult, use a 2 point scale only. Divide the mat with a line down the middle if necessary or use 2 separate mats or trays.

Suggested Starter topics and top scales - start with known preferences and immediate actions. These will help to teach the process of a Talking Mat.

Starter Topic	Top scale
food ; music; smells; noises; park equipment	Good /not good Yum/ yuck
packing a bag for swimming; setting the snack table	need /don't need
Known Places	Want to go/ don't want to go
Known Activities	Want to do/ don't want to do
Class work	Easy/ quite easy/ hard
	What's working/ not working
	What helps/ not sure/ Doesn't help

You may need to teach the language of less concrete top scales explicitly in context. E.g. at music time- John likes the drums, Connor likes the drums, Fiona doesn't like the drums (more suggestions below). Labelling 'like' or 'happy' to the person at a meaningful time is not only good language teaching, but is also a step towards teaching Talking Mats.

Check and Change – Be aware that this core Talking Mats principle may result in the thinker feeling they **have** to move one of the symbols. Just review the mat by saying ‘I want to check I understand, you told me.....’ Similarly it may be best to omit asking if the person wants to change anything

Using **different symbols** from the ones used for PECS, timetables or behaviour schedules may support the fact that a Talking Mat is different from other uses of symbols/pictures.

Features of ASD

The factors below will need to be considered if you feel that mat isn’t working.

The ‘black and white’ thinking style of people with ASD may lead them to ‘search’ for the correct answer, as responses that can change and don’t need to remain static and consistent (i.e. ‘shades of grey’) can be anxiety-provoking. They may also look to you the listener for clues how to respond.

A need to pattern – try and not let a pattern develop- Present one symbol at a time , then take it off the mat onto a record mat Use 2 mats, or 2 areas in a room (see Environment)

Individuals with ASD often have **piecemeal processing skills**, whereby they can focus in on the smallest detail of the symbol / picture / mat used. Their response is based on that detail as opposed to the concept behind the symbol.

Sorting - It is ok if the Thinker is ‘sorting’ the symbols . This is a different function from traditional Talking Mats. However sorting with a Talking Mat is a way of making thoughts explicit and allows the Listener to see what the person with ASD is thinking and can say to them ‘ I now know what you are thinking and that is ok’ Sorting also supports decision making which can lead to increased independence.

Summary

We heard from a Talking Mats trainer who worked with someone for 4 years before he learned to do a Talking Mat. They got there. The speed with which someone develops symbolic understanding is a good indicator.

The teaching steps along the way:

- **Joint attention – 3 way attention**
 - **Symbolic understanding**
 - **Language labelling**
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