

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

We know that people with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and their staff can find Talking Mats a valuable tool. There are people with ASD who even create their own mats to think about issues.

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 opinions, views, preferences, etc.

Certain aspects of ASD can be at odds with some of the principles of Talking Mats, 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 use Talking Mats effectively.

General:

The person with ASD may not understand what is expected from them initially. **Model** other people doing mats. Make sure they are exposed to seeing people doing Talking Mats without the pressure of the focus being on them. This may need to be done repeatedly.

The Environment- What does the thinker associate with the room? What typically happens here? What are the sensory demands in the room? Don't feel you have to sit at a table. An actual mat is not essential, - 2 tables or 2 areas in the room might work better. A Talking Wall or an interactive white board? Be aware that sitting beside the thinker may add to their anxiety. Consider the position and proximity which works best for each individual.

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?

Talking Mats principles

The **Purpose** -Use a mat initially for practical reasons, e.g sensory information, and make sure any actions from the mat are explicit and immediate. Use symbol options that you know are definite triggers to reinforce the learning of the top scale. Allow enough time for the person to process.

The Top Scale -

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



These may be more concrete than *like/not like; happy /not happy*. If the mid point is difficult, use a 2 point scale only. Divide the mat with a line down the middle if necessary. 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)

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

Features of ASD

The factors below may influence the outcome of the mat-

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 in order to get your ideas.

A need to pattern – try and not let a pattern develop- one symbol at a time and take off once placed for 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 and create a visual order around that area of interest, failing to zoom out of that detailed processing style and consider the bigger picture

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.

Suggested Starter topics and top scales - 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
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

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