

Talking Mats Autism Guidelines 2021

We have updated these guidelines through consultation with experienced practitioners, and in line with the current National Autistic Society Guidelines:

<https://www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/help-and-support/how-to-talk-about-autism>

Using Talking Mats with people on the Autism Spectrum

We know that autistic children and adults can find Talking Mats a valuable tool:

- It allows processing time and communication without speech.
- There are people on the autism spectrum who 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 people on the autism spectrum 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 Autism can mean some of the principles of Talking Mats are challenging and will need to be specifically taught, hence these adapted guidelines. The following guidelines have been developed through discussion with experienced practitioners and are worth considering when introducing Talking Mats with people on the autism spectrum . It is not an exhaustive guide, 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.
- 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: A person on the autism spectrum 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.

Level of Symbolic Understanding: Does the thinker recognise Objects/ Photos/ Pictures/ Symbols/ Words? Be aware that some thinkers may be easily distracted by visual details e.g. matching/sorting by colour rather than meaning.

Talking Mats Principles

The Purpose

Introduce Talking Mats for practical, meaningful topics relevant to the thinker. This helps us to achieve outcomes which are practical and meaningful for the thinker – person-centred practice in action.

For example, when talking about the topic ‘PE’, one boy expressed that he didn’t like the noise in the hall. Once he was given ear defenders, he started going to PE.

The Top Scale

Start with top scales that will have meaning for the thinker. Remember you don’t have to stick to faces or thumbs up/down – sometimes a stars topscale can work well (** * *).



Like/not like or happy /not happy may not be the most concrete/ understandable for that person. These concepts may need to be taught through targeted activities first. If needed, the mid-point can be removed to reduce the cognitive load for the thinker.

Suggested Topics and Top Scales for Talking Mats:

Start with known preferences and immediate/meaningful actions. Use only 3 or 4 options for each mat, if needed.

This will help thinkers to learn the process of a Talking Mat, using relevant topics.

Topic	Top scale
food; music; smells; noises; park equipment	Like/Not Sure/Don't Like
Known Places	Want to go/Not Sure/Don't want to go, Like/Not Sure/Don't Like
Known Activities	Want to do/ Sometimes Want to Do/ Don't Want to Do

	Like/Not Sure/Don't Like Happy/ Not Sure/ Not Happy
Class work	Can do/ Need some help/ Need a lot of help Happy/ Not Sure/ Not Happy What's going well/ sometimes going well/ not going well What helps/Not Sure/Doesn't help

You may need to teach the language of less concrete top scales explicitly in context. For example, modelling the language at music time – ‘John likes the drums, Connor likes the drums, Fiona doesn't like the drums’. Labelling ‘like’ or ‘happy’ to the thinker at a meaningful time is not only good language teaching, but is also a step towards using 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 charts may support the fact that a Talking Mat is different from other uses of symbols/pictures.

Features of Autism

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

The ‘black and white’ thinking style of people on the autism spectrum 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). People on the autism spectrum often have piecemeal processing skills, whereby they can focus in on the smallest detail of the symbol / picture / mat used. Their response could be based on that particular detail, as opposed to the concept behind the symbol, and so it is important that the listener is aware of this.

Sorting - It is ok if the Thinker is ‘sorting’ the symbols. However, this is a different function from traditional Talking Mats -instead, this is a Teaching Mat. Sorting with a Teaching Mat is a way of making thoughts explicit and allows the Listener to see what the person 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.

Working towards using Talking Mats - Using Teaching Mats:

If a thinker is not yet ready for traditional Talking Mats, you can introduce work on teaching mats.

When using Teaching Mats, you could divide the mat with a line down the middle if necessary, or use 2 separate mats, or 2 areas in the room. You could also consider a Teaching Wall or an interactive white board.

Teaching Mats can support the thinker to make choices, using symbol options that are clear triggers of positive and negative. This reinforces the learning of the top scale.

Choose familiar topics that are motivating for the thinker, such as food, or TV Programmes. As with Talking Mats, you will need to consult with people who know the individual well when planning a Teaching Mat.

Topic Suggestions (using items that are present so there is an immediate action)	Topscale Suggestions
Food	Good (to eat)/ not good (to eat) Yum/Yuck Like/ not like
Smells	Like/ Not like
TV Programmes	Want (to watch)/ Don't Want (to watch)
Music/Radio	Want (to listen to)/ Don't Want (to listen to)
Nail Varnish/ Hand cream	Like/ Not like (If like - put it on)
Review a particular activity immediately after completing e.g. Cooking, Swimming Explore practical topics such as 'packing a bag for swimming' or 'setting the snack table' or 'making soup'	Need/ Not Need

Remember to use lots of modelling and try teaching mats every day, until it is clear that the thinker is understanding the positive and the negative.

For more information about Teaching Mats, take a look at this blog:
<https://www.talkingmats.com/when-is-a-talking-mat-not-a-talking-mat/>

We are always happy to hear from practitioners using Talking Mats – please have a go - and let us know how you get on.