



Working Towards Talking Mats Guidelines

Part 2: Things to Consider

These guidelines are designed for Talking Mats Foundation-Trained Practitioners, who may be working with Thinkers who need some extra support to engage in the Talking Mats process.

Remember we cannot call an activity a 'Talking Mat' unless the full Talking Mats process is being used, as described in your Foundation Training course.

It is important to recognise that for some people it may not be possible to progress through the activities described in Part 1, however they could potentially be trialled so that the emphasis is on finding out what a person CAN do, in terms of sharing a view, rather than what they cannot.

What Areas of Support do we Need to Consider?

Understanding and Processing Spoken Language relating to a Talking Mat	<p>A thinker will need to be able to understand and process the language needed for the Topics and Options on their Talking Mat, as well as the instructions and questions embedded in the Talking Mats process.</p> <p>Remember the Circles Planning Tool described in your Foundation Training course and think about concrete vs abstract language in particular.</p>
Understanding Symbols	<p><i>What is symbolic understanding?</i></p> <p>Symbolic understanding is where a person understands that a symbol represents an object, place, person, concept or idea that may or may not be physically present. Symbolic understanding is a cognitive skill that enables individuals to recognize and interpret symbols. Symbols include images, picture symbols and written words.</p> <p><i>How do I establish if someone understands symbols?</i> You could try:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• talking to communication partners to find out how someone responds to symbols already available in the environment• checking whether someone can follow verbal instructions accompanied by symbols (such as a visual timetable)• checking whether someone can select from two or more symbols to communicate a choice.• introducing symbols for communication in the person's environment to gauge their response
Attention	<p>A Thinker may not be able to sustain attention to the Talking Mat for the whole conversation. It may be</p>

	<p>possible to refocus their attention after a pause, such as a movement break or a change in topic.</p> <p>You may need to plan to carry out the Talking Mat for a particular topic over two or more sessions. You could also consider reducing the number of options to match the attention span of the Thinker. Remember we advise preparing a maximum of up to 18 options for any Talking Mats conversation.</p>
Verbal Language/ Extra Information	<p>Talking Mats can support conversations with people who may have little or no speech. Remember there is no pressure for verbal speech, and any Thinker can say as little or as much as they want. Extra information is valuable, but it is important to let it come naturally. Use pausing rather than prompting to give the Thinker space to say more if they want to. Remember the Talking Mats Process as described in your Foundation Training course.</p> <p>If you are working with an AAC user, further detailed guidance and training can be accessed by completing our Advanced AAC Module.</p>
Accessibility	<p>A person may have physical needs that require adaptations to support access to the Talking Mat. For some people, handling or placing the option cards on the mat may not be possible. Adaptations may also be needed to ensure people with visual or hearing impairments can access and use the mat effectively.</p> <p>Further guidance and training around accessibility and adaptations can be accessed in our Advanced AAC Module.</p>
Developing Self Advocacy	<p>Remember the Talking Mats Values discussed in your Foundation Training course.</p> <p>Using Talking Mats can help people understand that it is a safe and supportive way to communicate their true views and opinions.</p> <p>Their views may differ from the views and opinions of others, but this is okay.</p>

Talking Mats is about developing trust in a neutral, non-judgmental environment as created by you as the Listener.

There are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers – the aim is to support the Thinker to have agency over their own decisions.

Our Introductory Talking Mats Script (See Appendix) may help a Thinker to understand what to expect before they do their first Talking Mats session.

What Influencing Factors do We Need to Consider?

The Relationship

Who carries out the Talking Mat will impact the quality of the information received and the effectiveness of the conversation. Whilst a Listener always needs to have completed the Foundation training, factors you also need to consider include:

- Think about how well you know the Thinker, for example, would you be able to recognise signs of anxiety and distress? Having a chat with those closer to the Thinker is important if you are not sure.
- Think about how the Thinker sees you. They may see you as an authority figure. Using the Talking Mats process as described in your Foundation Training course helps to balance this power dynamic in your relationship.
- If another person is going to be present in the session, make sure you explain the Talking Mats process and purpose beforehand to limit the potential for any verbal or non-verbal signals which may influence or lead the Thinker. If possible, it can be a good idea to ask the person to sit behind the Thinker, so they are out of sight.

If you are working with an AAC user, further guidance around having a familiar person present is explored in our Advanced AAC Module.

The Environment

Think about:

- having a quiet space with as few distractions as possible
- whether the Thinker associates the room with other activities, positive or negative
- the sensory demands in the space, such as noise, bright lights, and colourful displays - can these be reduced if needed?
- the position of the mat in the space - remember that whilst the mat needs to be in front of the Thinker, it does not need to be at a table.

Timing

When you carry out a Talking Mat may influence a Thinker's willingness or ability to engage. It is important to have a chat with those who know the Thinker well when choosing a time. There may be a better time of day when the Thinker might find it easier to engage in a Talking Mats conversation.

Sensory Regulation

It is important to think about your Thinker's sensory needs, and what might support them to feel calm during the Talking Mats conversation. For example, using a fidget object might help.

Also, be mindful of co-regulation. When we are well regulated ourselves, we bring a sense of calm to the conversation, which in turn helps the Thinker feel calmer and engage more easily.

English as an Additional Language

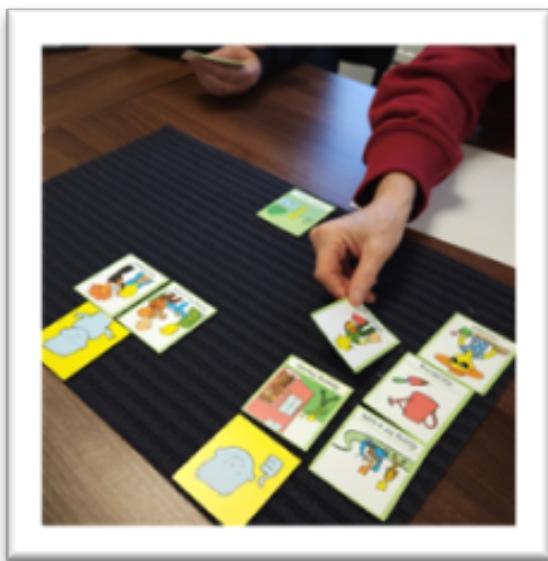
Potential Thinkers who are learning a language can benefit from the visual process of Talking Mats. Information gained from a Talking Mat can help towards checking levels of understanding, as well as spoken language.

Adaptations

There are many physical adaptations that could be considered and trialled to support someone to access a Talking Mat. These could include propping up the mat to make it more visible/accessible and providing larger or high contrast symbols for visual impairment.

Adaptations for AAC users are looked at in depth in the Talking Mats Advanced AAC Module.

Appendix: Introductory Talking Mats Suggested Script



- A Talking Mat is all about me – what I think, and how I feel.
- It can be about anything at all, like food, school/work, activities.
- I can look at each picture one at a time then put it on the mat to show how I feel about it.
- I can say as little or as much as I want about the pictures.
- We can add new ideas by drawing or writing on a sticky note.
- I can change my mind about where I have put a picture and move it to another part of the mat if I want to.
- I can say if I want to stop.
- At the end, we can take a photo of the mat and talk about what might happen next.