TalkingMats

Improving communication, improving lives

Working Towards Talking Mats Guidelines

Part 1: Checking/Building Capacity

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

These activities should be adapted and tailored to each person's everyday/lived experience and specific areas of interest - a personalised approach is key.

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.

Most of the activities described here are not Talking Mats, but are sorting activities which can potentially support someone to develop the skills needed to do Talking Mats in the future.

These activities can also be used to check a person's 'readiness' for Talking Mats, for 'Circle 1' type sessions, as described in your Foundation Training course.

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

Checking/Building Capacity 1:

Understanding Positive vs Negative Concepts

1. ***Making a Meaningful Choice between Two Objects***

A good starting point is to consider if the person can make a meaningful choice between two objects. They may reach out to choose an object, or use an alternative means of communicating, such as eye pointing towards an object. Before a person can start sorting real objects, you will want to check their responses when choice making between two objects or objects of reference.

You will need to ensure that the person is familiar with the names of the objects you will be working with.

Before sorting real objects, make sure you name these objects frequently during relevant activities, alongside showing them the object.

2. *Sorting Real Objects*

This is an example of a sorting activity carried out by a young person who is about to go swimming. The basket on the left-hand side with the thumbs up symbol is for items needed for swimming. The basket on the right-hand side with the thumbs down symbol is for items not needed for swimming. The young person has sorted items that they need for swimming and others that are not needed.

This sorting activity was modelled many times by the young person's carer before they started to sort the objects independently.

This is a great example of an activity where the person is developing their skills at sorting objects into two different categories, in a real-life situation.

3. *Sorting Real Objects alongside Photos/Symbols*

Once this young person could sort the items needed for swimming, corresponding photos were introduced alongside the items.

These were modelled by the carer for several months so that the young person started to become familiar with them.

This included introducing photos in the young person's environment, for example as part of a Now/Next timetable, to support the young person's understanding and to increase their familiarity with these photos. This approach could also be done using clear symbols.

Case Example

P is a teenager with an acquired brain injury and ADHD. She uses spoken language in everyday conversation including lots of learned phrases. It is often assumed that she can understand spoken language at the same pace and complexity, but needs language to be simplified and supported with visuals.

On assessment, P found it difficult to complete a Talking Mat using a 3-point scale to express her views/opinions. P consistently placed options she was known to enjoy, such as trampolining, on the negative side of the mat. The practitioner decided to focus on building P's capacity for Talking Mats using sorting activities as described above.

For example, to coincide with her 'beach' topic in school, real objects were introduced and over time, P became familiar with the beach vocabulary and was able to match the real objects to picture symbols consistently.

A picture sorting activity was then introduced and modelled initially, focusing on items that are at the beach/are not at the beach. Over several sessions, P began to sort these symbols independently and enjoyed some of the 'sillier' options such as whether we would find a bath at the beach. This indicated that she was now able to sort not only objects but also symbols, in this type of simple sorting activity.

Checking/Building Capacity 2:

Relating Symbols to the Meanings they Convey

It is essential for the person to understand the symbols you are going to present within a sorting activity or Talking Mat.

You may need to check this understanding in other situations, before introducing the symbols in a sorting activity or Talking Mat.

This may involve modelling and and familarising the person with the symbols, using the activities described above.

How do I know which symbols to use for a Talking Mat?

Someone who already uses picture symbols for communication in their environment may be able to move between familiar and less familiar symbol sets with no difficulty.

For some people, using familiar picture symbols for a Talking Mat may work best.

Others may find it helpful to use less familiar symbols. This can support them to distinguish Talking Mats symbols from other symbols used in the environment, and to understand that the purpose of a Talking Mat is different.

Example Sorting Activities

1. *Sorting picture symbols/photos immediately after an activity*

Here, a sorting activity has been carried out by a person with a learning disability who is developing their independent cooking skills.

The sorting activity was completed immediately after making soup, whilst the activity and the vocabulary were at the forefront of their memory.

2. *Sorting picture symbols/photos – increasing the length of time after activity*

These sorting activities were introduced to someone who was already able to complete a sorting activity immediately after the activity was complete.

The sorting activities below aimed to build on sorting skills a period of time after an activity had taken place.

The picture above shows a sorting activity focusing on the activities the person did/didn't do at the park, a few hours before the session.

The picture above shows a sorting activity focusing on the activities the person did/didn't do on holiday, the week before the session.

Checking/Building Capacity 3:

Environmental Modelling

We can think about supporting understanding of symbols and the meanings they convey as part of general communication opportunities.

We can use Talking Mats symbols, and/or symbols familiar to a person, in 'real time', linking to naturally occurring communication opportunities and meaningful experiences for the Thinker.

For example, you could familiarise a person with the Top Scale symbols by making sure these are available separately from an actual Talking Mat. You could have them on your person, or in a place that is easy to reach within the person's environment.

Modelling symbols is an approach often used when supporting a person to develop skills as an AAC user. It involves pointing to symbols alongside spoken communication.

When using environmental modelling to work towards Talking Mats, a communication partner might notice a Thinker expressing a feeling and use one of the Talking Mats Top Scale symbols to model this.

For example, if a person showed excitement about going swimming, a communication partner might show the person the 'positive' Talking Mats symbol and say something like "I think you are telling me you like going swimming; you like swimming!" In this way, the Thinker is supported to connect their feeling with the symbol.

This example demonstrates how a modelling approach worked well in one school setting:
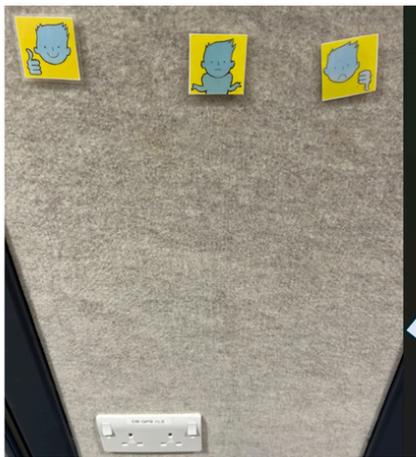
This is a section of a wall within a classroom in a primary school. A 'fluffy' piece of material has been added to the wall so that symbols can be placed on it and moved around. The Top Scale symbols are placed at the top and allow an easily accessible reference point in the class so that the symbols can be modelled as opportunities arise.

Here you can see that 'wearing hats and gloves' has been placed on the 'don't like' side of the mat. This was a 'real time' communication opportunity that arose on a cold January day when a young person did not want to put their hat and gloves on. A Learning Assistant took the opportunity to acknowledge this with the young person and linked it with the Talking Mats Top Scale.

Checking/Building Capacity 4:

Relating Symbols/Options to the Top Scale

The Talking Mats process is based on a 3-point scale to get quality, nuanced information about people's views/opinions.

You might want to consider taking away the midpoint of the scale, but you need to remember that this will mean that the quality of information received from a Talking Mat is reduced. It can also mean the activity can end up being more of a sorting activity instead of an actual Talking Mat, unless the Talking Mats process is followed, as described in your Foundation Training course.

However, 2-point scale sorting activities or Talking Mats can support a Thinker to work on giving their views whilst reducing the language and processing demands of a 3-point scale.

Expressing Views using 2-point Scale Object Sorting Activities

Some people may not understand what is expected from them initially. It will be important for them to see others doing sorting activities in the types of activities described above.

This helps to demonstrate that although there is a positive and a negative sides to the sorting activities and Talking Mats, these don't equate to 'right' or 'wrong'.

Modelling a sorting activity or Talking Mat also reduces the pressure of the focus being on the person themselves. Modelling sorting activities or Talking Mats can be done repeatedly and over time, in both individual and group settings. Modelling will be particularly important for people who may be focused on making 'patterns', rather than reflecting their actual views.

However, it is important to recognise that the person may be copying or influenced by other's responses in this type of modelling/group activity, and so their views cannot be judged as being completely their own and should not be taken as such.

If someone is not yet at a stage where they are recognising and using symbols/photos, it is possible for them to express their preferences about real objects using a 2-point scale sorting activity, with two baskets/containers rather than an actual mat. The 2-point scale would use concrete language such as Like/Not like. Sensory topics can work really well for this type of activity.

In the activity below, the person is currently able to understand real objects rather than picture symbols/photographs. Here they have completed a sorting activity to share their preferences for eating different fruits. The 2 point scale symbols are used for 'like' and 'don't like.'

Expressing Views using 2-point Scale Talking Mats

This is the stage where we can say someone is using Talking Mats rather than it being a simple sorting activity - as long as the Talking Mats process is used as described in your Foundation Training course.

In the Talking Mats session below, the topic of 'smells' was introduced to this Thinker, who already uses picture symbols in their environment and for communication.

The real objects were used for the Thinker to smell each one before placing the equivalent option under 'like' on the left of the mat, or 'don't like' on the right of the mat. **The full Talking Mats process was used, and so this was more than just a simple sorting activity.**

This Talking Mat formed part of an assessment of the Thinker's understanding of positive/negative concepts; their non-verbal reaction to each smell correlated with where they placed each symbol on the mat.

Expressing Views on 3-point Scale Talking Mats

(Concrete/Neutral Topics)

When introducing a Talking Mat with a 3-point scale, it is a good idea to start with concrete topics.

The example below shows an 'About me' Talking Mat which was used as an ice breaker for an teenager with autism who was not currently accessing education.

Some options which were known to be more emotive including 'meeting new people' and 'school' were introduced towards the end of the Talking Mat. Blanks were offered and the Thinker wanted to add in using TikTok.

Note the use of a concrete Top Scale (like, ok, don't like) to support the Thinker's understanding, as this was their first experience of using a Talking Mat.

Expressing views on 3-point Scale Talking Mats

(Concrete/Neutral Topic with more Abstract Top Scale)

This Thinker completed a Talking Mat which had a concrete Topic 'Home' but a more abstract Top Scale (Coping/Not coping).

The Listener checked their understanding of 'coping' before completing the Talking Mat. More abstract options such as 'Self-care' and 'Mental health' were introduced towards the end of the Talking Mat, once the Thinker had considered more concrete options.

A more abstract Top Scale introduced with concrete options initially to support understanding. When it was clear the Thinker was understanding the language and concepts being discussed, more abstract options were introduced by the Listener.

Checking/Building Capacity 5:

Case Example: Building Capacity over Time

A is 11 years old. When Talking Mats was introduced to him he showed his Listener that he was not yet engaging with the Talking Mats process with understanding.

A tended to place all of his symbols on the positive side of the mat very quickly. A was initially engaging with Talking Mats as a 'task to complete' rather than understanding it as an opportunity to share his views.

Over the course of a year, A was supported to work towards using Talking Mats, using the following approaches:

- Opportunities to take on the listening role and **experience Talking Mats being modelled** by his teachers in school
- **Increased opportunities to use Talking Mats regularly**, linked with every day and tangible activities
- School staff modelled the Talking Mats Top Scale symbols as they helped to reinforce A's observed feelings **in naturally occurring communication opportunities.**

This is one of A's Talking Mats as he was working towards using a Talking Mat with understanding. You can see that all of his symbols are on the positive side of the mat.

This is A's Talking Mat after around a year of 'working towards.' You can see symbols placed across the mat and also a 'blank' symbol added. This Talking Mat was used to represent A's views at a time of important transition and demonstrates how his understanding of the mat as a thinking tool has developed.

Checking/Building Capacity 6:

Case Example: Modelling the Role of the Thinker

As mentioned above, it can be helpful for a practitioner who is supporting a potential Thinker to model being in the Thinking role.

The practitioner can model their authentic views on a topic, modelling where they would place their symbols across the mat. The potential Thinker can observe and join in the conversation as they wish.

This has advantages in that it supports a balanced, equal relationship between Thinker and Listener. The Listener is sharing a message that "Talking Mats is something that I find helpful too and I want to share some of my opinions with you.".

Modelling the Thinking role also gives a helpful opportunity to support

understanding that it is OK to use the negative side of the mat.

In the example below, a Talking Mat was modelled by a practitioner with a young person who was not yet using Talking Mats with understanding and, particularly, was not sharing any feelings on the negative side of the mat.
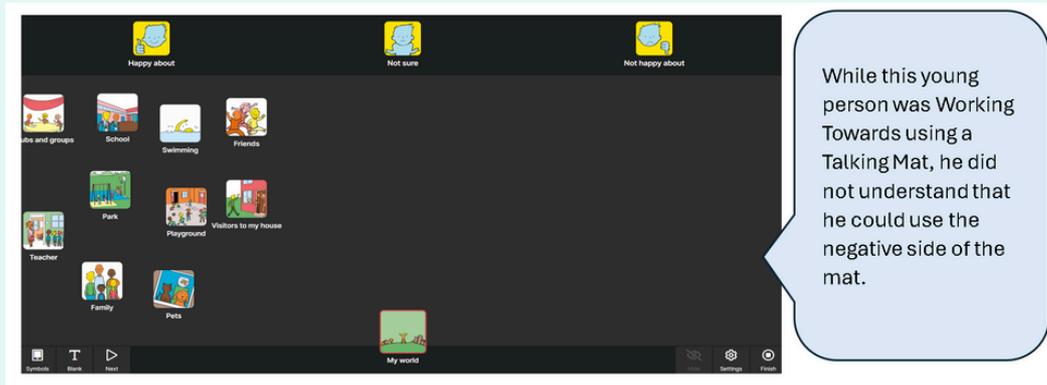
In the modelling session below, the practitioner shared that she was 'not happy about' her pets. The young person became very animated about this as he is a real animal lover! The practitioner explained that her cat had been scratching the living room carpet and making holes in it. They spent time talking about this with lots of pointing to the 'not happy about' symbol to reinforce understanding of how this symbol could be used.
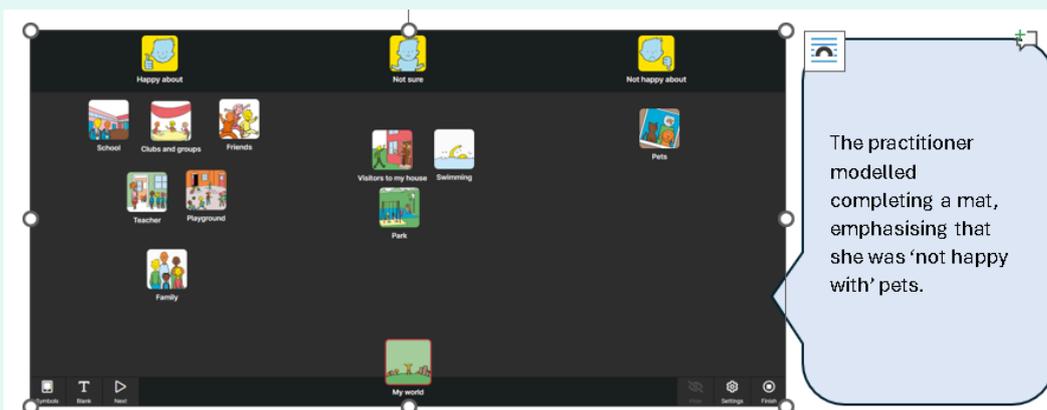
The following week the young person completed a Talking Mat in the role of Thinker at a much slower pace, and 'swithered' over his answers – indicating he 'wasn't sure' about a social group he was currently attending. There was a clear difference in how the young person completed his mat when compared with the previous weeks.
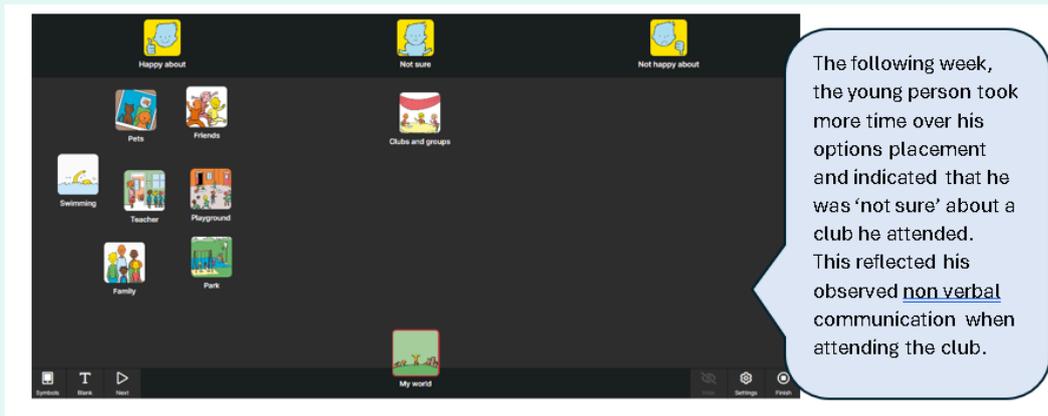
This example shows how powerful Talking Mats can be in supporting thinking as well as communication, as discussed in your Foundation course.

If you wish to use Talking Mats to enable supported decision making within the context of capacity, find out more about our Capacity: Enabling Supported Decision Making course listed here:

https://www.talkingmats.com/training/advanced-courses-specialist/

Now take a look at Part 2 for further details of what to consider when introducing and/or working towards Talking Mats.

Talking Mats Symbols: the Symbols are designed and © to Adam Murphy 2015 and assigned to Talking Mats Ltd. in perpetuity. They may not be reproduced without permission.

Widgit Symbols © Widgit Software 2002–2026