

TRANSCRIPT: Symbol exchange

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Symbol exchange is a communication system for children with little or no speech. We also use the system to scaffold children who have some speech but may use it out of context or may struggle to talk in stressful situations.

It's a functional communication system, so we always begin by finding out which sort of things the child loves to play with and, once we have that information, we'll start offering them a motivating item and they will learn to pick up a symbol and place it into the hand of a communicative partner to ask for the toy. We keep all of the language really simple.

Georgia doesn't need to know that the symbol was actually a photograph of the toy. She's just learning that if she gives me something, she will get something back.

Later we would then give her two symbols and for the first time she would really need to look at the symbols and discriminate between them, and we would gradually build that up until, hopefully, she can discriminate from at least five symbols and scan on her board to search for the target symbol.

We would then set up situations where her preferred items are out of sight, so that she would have to go and find her folder, remove the symbol, and go and find an adult to ask. But, obviously, for it to work well she needs to generalise, so we need to make sure that it carries on back in the classroom and we work with parents to set up programmes at home.

Once children are able to discriminate, we then introduce a sentence strip. So, instead of just giving a symbol to ask for a toy, they would also learn to put an 'I want' on the sentence strip and then give that to the adult who would read it back, 'I want slinky'.

The children who were playing the pop-up pirate game were using a sentence strip and they had to add a colour to refine the request and we have found, in school, that once children realise they've got a way of asking for something, it has prevented a lot of challenging behaviours.

A lot of our day-to-day communication is chit chat and not just making requests for things, so we try and use as many different starters as we can.

Some children can discriminate from a vast number of symbols and have progressed to using a voice output communication aid.

The aim is that children use symbol exchange in as many different situations as possible, and that it's a portable system that they take with them wherever they go.

