

Objects of Reference

What is an ‘object of reference’?

An object of reference is any object which is used regularly to represent an item, activity, place, or person. Understanding real objects is the first stage of understanding visual information – this is sometimes called ‘symbolic development’. Objects of reference is one of the easiest ways to add meaning to or ‘represent’ a word.

Why use objects of reference?

Some children may need more help to learn and understand spoken language. By using objects that relate to specific activities, the child begins to link the spoken word with the object. Objects of reference can help the child to know what is about to happen (e.g. to anticipate activities), to be able to make choices, to be able to understand the ‘order’ of events or routines, to know what is happening now and what will happen next and to know when an activity is finished or ending.

How to use objects of reference with your child

- Consider important or regular routines/activities in your child’s life e.g. dinner time, bath time, going to school/nursery.
- Choose an object which you can use consistently to represent each activity.
- Try to start with a few key objects and routines that are meaningful to your child. Once your child is showing an understanding of these objects, start to gradually introduce more.
- At the start of each activity, give your child the object to hold and explore (look, touch, smell it etc.).
- Say your child’s name followed by the activity e.g. “Dinner Time”.
- Remember to use the same words and object each time to support understanding.
- Let your school/nursery know what objects of reference you are using so that they can do the same in each setting.
- See below for some examples of objects of reference you could use for everyday activities:

Activity	Object of reference
Eating dinner	Plastic spoon, plastic plate
Going Swimming	Arm bands
Going home	Plastic keys
Going in the car	Toy car
Going to school/nursery	Piece of uniform (clothing)
Taking a bath	Rubber duck
Getting dressed	Piece of clothing e.g. sock
Bed time	Teddy/piece of bedding/pyjamas

