Symbol Hierarchy

PROJECT ACCESS

WHAT IS IT?

The visual symbol hierarchy is a method that can be used when creating different kinds of visual supports for students. It helps guide students to what is important without overwhelming them.

SYMBOL HIERARCY

Object Level:
- Most concrete:
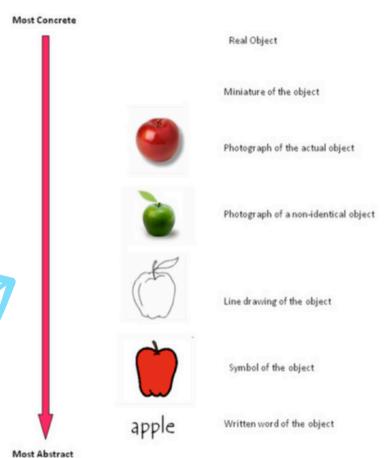 - Real Object
  - Miniature of the Object

Photograph Level:
- Less Concrete/More Abstract
  - Photograph of the actual object
  - Photograph of non-identical object

Symbolic Level:
- Most Abstract
  - Line drawing of the object
  - Symbol of the object
  - Written word of the object

Most Concrete

Real Object

Miniature of the object

Photograph of the actual object

Photograph of a non-identical object

Line drawing of the object

Symbol of the object

apple

Written word of the object

Most Abstract

WHEN TO USE IT?

If you are planning to use any type of visual supports in your classroom, referring to the visual symbol hierarchy is a great place to start. It's best to observe and familiarize yourself with your student's ability level to hep determine where on the hierarchy you should start. When in doubt, start with a more concrete option and fade to the more abstract options.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR BEFORE TEACHING THE SYMBOL

- Refer to evaluation data and observations of the student. Skills to look at include:
    - Fine motor
    - Cognitive functioning
    - Sensorimotor
    - Receptive/Expressive communication
    - Socialization level
    - Preferred topics of interest
- What messages/functions does the student communicate with his/her behavior?
- Knowing your student very well is the basis for choosing the symbols you'll use for them.

TIPS TO REMEMBER

- Have the symbol ALWAYS available.
- Repetition is helpful to enhance memory of the symbol's meaning.
- Go slowly. Introducing new symbols too quickly causes confusion.
- Teaching the use of symbols for communication and work systems is a process. Keep a record of what symbols the student has learned and can use.

TEACHING THE SYMBOL

1. Use systematic pairing of a symbol to its referent. Eventually you'll want to pair a concrete symbol to a more abstract symbol.
2. Consistently respond to the student's appropriate use of the new symbol (honor their request).
3. Avoid responding to old inappropriate behaviors, while helping the student to practice using the new symbol and behaviors. Cue the student toward the symbol to get them to use it instead.
4. Generalize the use of the symbol. Change locations, times of day, different tasks, different staff person, etc.
5. Model the symbol yourself!
6. Students will likely return to old inappropriate behaviors if the symbol level is too difficult. Go back to a more concrete level and re-teach skills until the student is comfortable again.
7. Reinforce! Reinforce! Reinforce!

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Visual Supports
#58

Reinforcement
#34

Prompting
#85

GET CONNECTED!