

# How to build confident early learners



Strategies to help children in Early Years develop communication and language skills

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# Executive summary

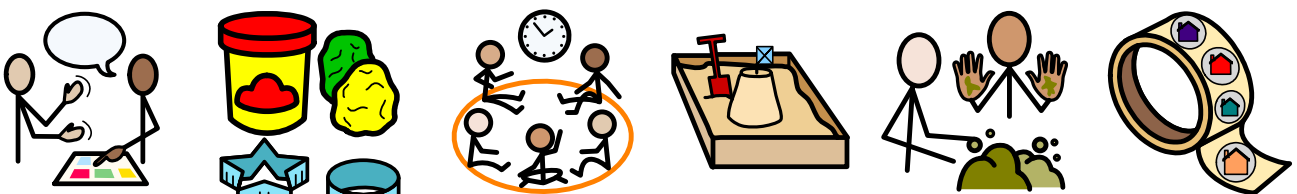
Children entering Early Years education are eager to make sense of the world around them and get down to the business of learning – but poor speech and language can hold them back.

When a child finds it difficult to understand the language of the setting, it's much harder for them to engage in everything that is going on around them, making interaction, communication, playing and sharing more challenging.

Children need to develop communication skills as early as possible so they can learn and flourish.

To support children at every stage of their language development, many Early Years settings are using visual aids in the form of symbols. These symbols are simple illustrations of everyday objects, concepts and ideas which can be used in numerous ways to boost children's speech, language and understanding.

This guide provides some best practice ideas from Early Years teachers and Speech and Language professionals on how symbols can be used to give young children the best possible start.



*“Focusing on language and communication is especially important for young children and will support the development of a range of early literacy skills as well as their wider knowledge and understanding.”*

# Barriers to learning

More children in Early Years education than ever before are having difficulties communicating, and this is having an impact on their learning as they prepare to start school.

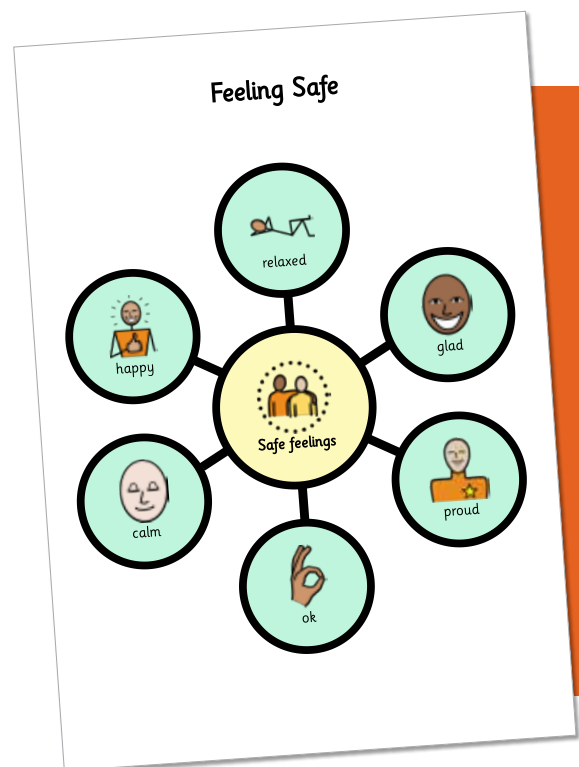
An article in the SEND Network<sup>2</sup> highlighted that 96% of schools expressed significant concerns over children's communication and language development, as they entered their first year of formal education.

Language delay is a particular issue for today's under-fives because they lived much of their early lives through the pandemic, having limited opportunity to mix with children and adults outside of their immediate family.

The impact of those missed opportunities is also emerging in children's social and emotional development.

A report from CORAM Family and Childcare titled 'Implications of COVID for Early Childhood Education and Care in England'<sup>3</sup> found that children struggled to adapt to new situations, socialise, and develop self-regulation skills.

For children not used to dealing with social situations and lacking the language they need, Early Years can be a bewildering experience, causing anxiety, frustration and even anger.



*“We are definitely seeing more children with language delay and social and emotional needs than we did five or ten years ago.”*

Odessa Stephenson, SENCo and Early Years Lead at Monkhouse Primary School

# Barriers to learning

## When children don't understand

It's the middle of a busy morning at pre-school and you are trying to get the children settled down so you can read them a story. But one child doesn't understand it's time to finish playing and tidy up.

You try to explain, but you can see the child hasn't acknowledged what you are saying and is starting to feel cross that their game is being interrupted.

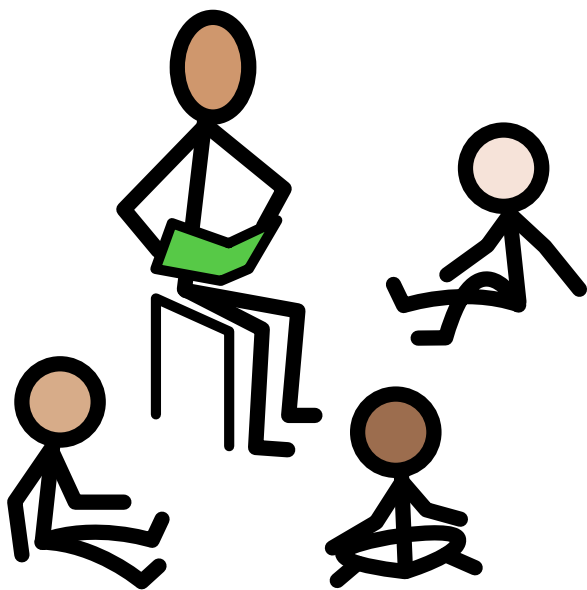


# Barriers to learning

So, you point to the picture on the wall with a clock showing 11 o'clock and the words 'story time'. Again, the child's expression shows their lack of understanding.

Confusion turns into anxiety or frustration and then anger. Resolving the issue eats up ten minutes of story time and disrupts everyone's learning.

The problem with a spoken instruction is that it disappears as soon as it has been said, making it hard for the child to remember the words and understand them. Equally, a written prompt makes no sense to a child who is not yet able to read.



A child at a pre-literate stage – whatever their ability level – can find the things we take for granted very confusing. One way to compare that child's experience is to imagine yourself parachuted into a country where you don't speak or understand the language.

People try to help you, but it's difficult to understand what they are saying and the more they speak, the more frustrated you feel. The writing on signs in the street and the words on the shopfronts are hard to decode and you are not sure of their meaning.



# Barriers to learning

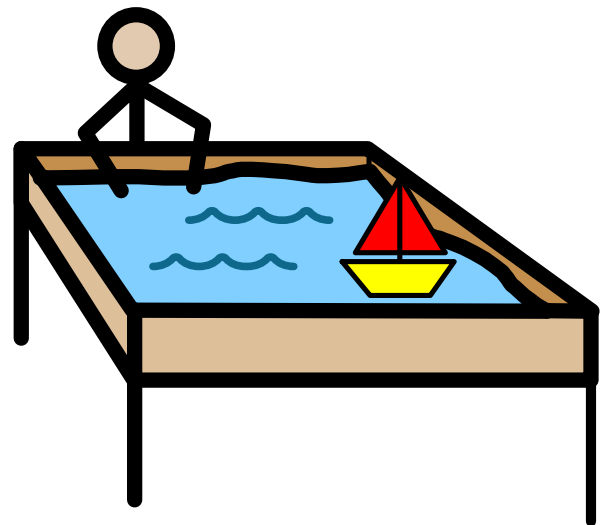
That is what Early Years can be like for a child who is still developing their language skills.

Many Early Years providers find visual aids a powerful way to help children process what is happening around them so they can understand and communicate.

Symbols are a form of visual aid, and they are particularly effective for young

children. Symbols are simple images which can represent anything children are seeing or using – a lunchbox, apron, or toy cupboard for instance – and they are presented in a clear and consistent format to aid understanding.

Unlike a photograph or a picture which can convey too much information and be confusing, a symbol has a simple, defined meaning which is easy for a child to interpret, as demonstrated here:



## How symbols help

Take the example of the confused and angry child who didn't understand why they had to stop playing. A visual timetable of the day with symbols for toys followed by story time would have helped them see it was time to tidy away and sit down on the carpet.

We are all used to seeing symbols in our everyday lives in the form of visual checklists, health and safety notices, and even road signs. We instantly know what each of these means:



But there is plenty of evidence to suggest children can benefit from symbols too – enabling them to understand the world around them as well as boosting their language development.

A research team from the University of Reading<sup>4</sup> produced a paper which explores the use of graphic symbols in mainstream Early Years settings. Their investigations show that not only do symbols help children learn new vocabulary, they also help children follow and remember routines.

In fact, for some children, visual prompts are essential to unlocking learning. This ties in with the increasing focus on the importance of recognising different learning styles in mainstream education.

The education organisation Speech and Language UK<sup>5</sup> says: “Many children learn better when they have pictures to help them. Lots of children are visual learners, which means they learn by seeing things rather than listening.”

*“When we’re teaching children the beginnings of language it is so useful to have visual representations of everyday objects around the room. They help to explain to a child what is going on in their surroundings.”*

Sophie Hutton, Speech and Language Therapist and CEO of Nest Therapy



# How symbols help

## Addressing different needs

While there's a growing body of evidence highlighting the benefits of symbol use in mainstream education, symbols are also a key element in supporting children with additional needs.

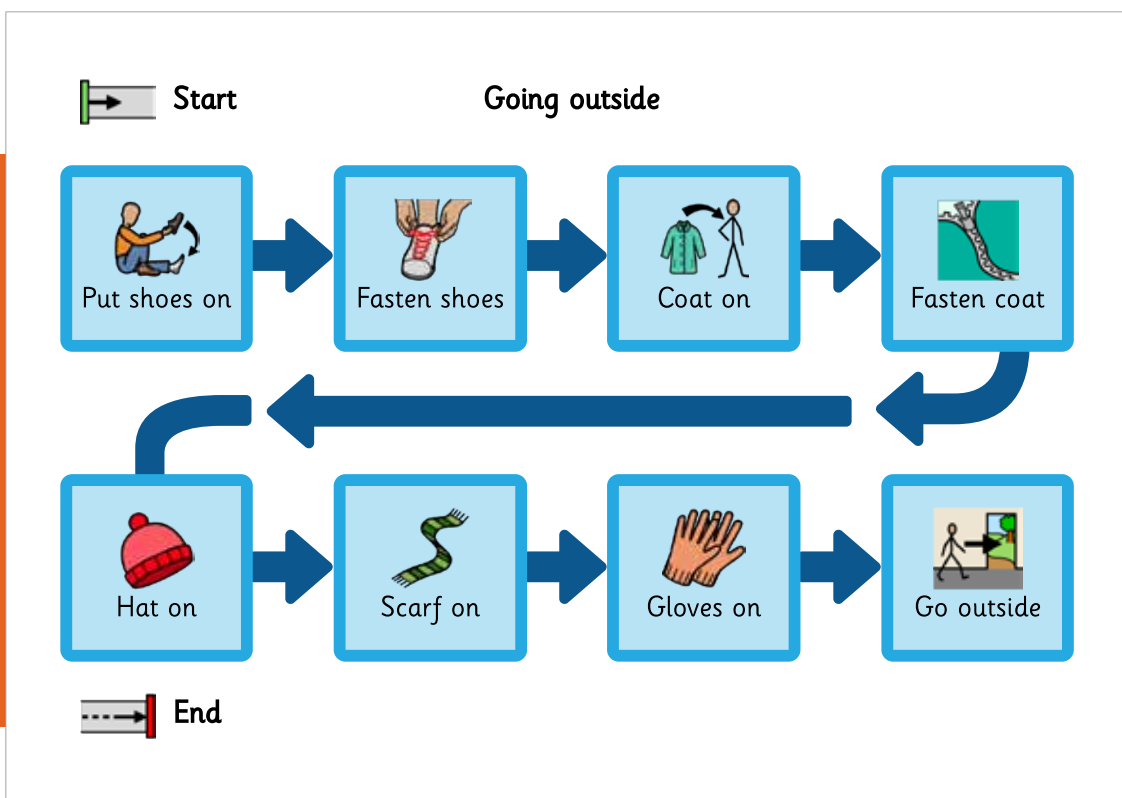
Early Years practitioners are used to catering for children who are developing at a different pace to their peers, and symbols can play an important role in supporting every child.

This view is reinforced in the publication *Inclusive Teach*<sup>6</sup> which outlines why it makes sense to create symbol-supported resources for learners who communicate

differently – whether this is due to speech, language and communication needs, autism, developmental delay, or other needs.

There is plenty of research to confirm the effectiveness of symbols throughout a child's early education, and beyond into their primary school years.

After speaking to Early Years professionals to see how they are using symbols to support children's development, the following sections provide some simple symbol-supported strategies to help every child to thrive and get ready to learn.



# How symbols help



## 1. Help children navigate their day

A room full of toys, activities and playmates can be exciting but overwhelming for some children, and it takes time to learn what to expect during their day at an Early Years setting. This includes getting used to daily routines – right from hanging their coat on the peg at the start of the session, through to preparing for home time.

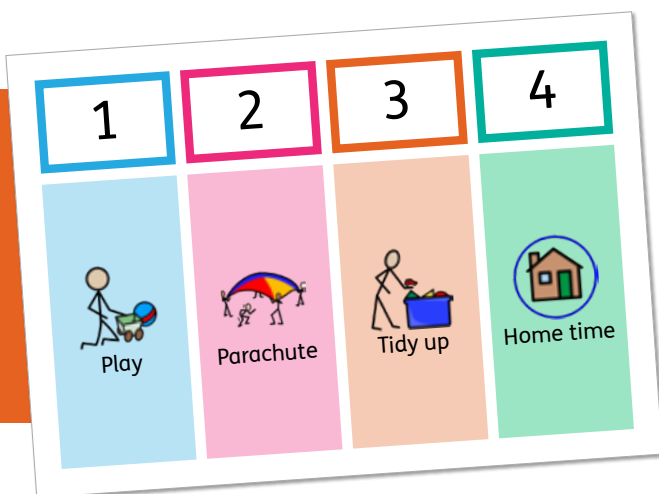
### The daily routine

A **Visual Timetable** using symbols is a great way to help children understand what will happen throughout the day. These can be broken down into more specific parts of the session such as snack time, outdoor play or circle time, and to reinforce good hygiene like handwashing before eating.

Sophie Hutton, Speech and Language Therapist and CEO of Nest Therapy specialist nursery provision, explains how this works: “We put together visual timetables to use in the nursery and we also send them home to their families. It helps children prepare for what is going to happen, so they arrive knowing that we will be painting today, or putting on our wellington boots for a walk.”

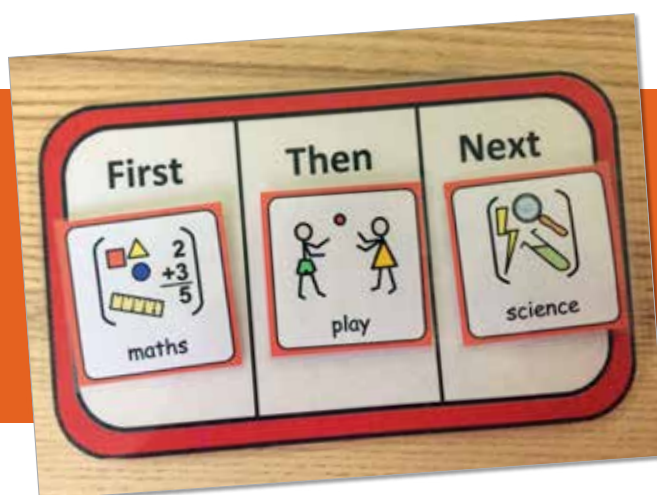
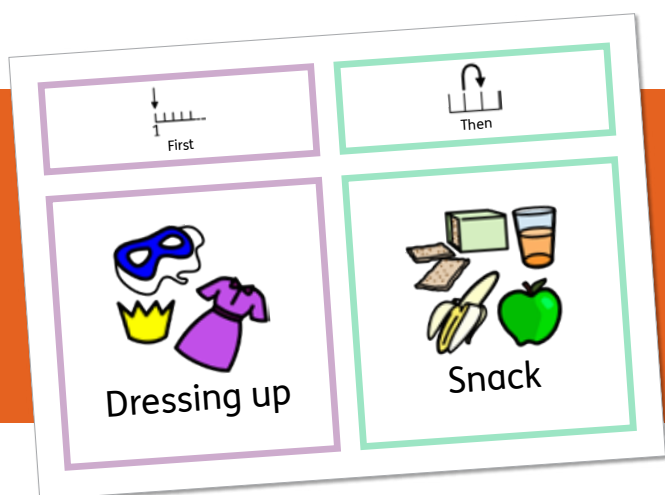
### Transitions during the day

Children often struggle with the idea of finishing one activity to start another, and it’s something which can easily lead to tears or anxiety. But symbols are a useful way to introduce change.



“**First and Then Boards** work really well in explaining transitions that happen during the day,” continues Sophie. “The boards help children understand that one activity will come to an end, and another will begin. This really helps to reduce anxiety for a child who is worried about moving from one thing to the next, because the symbols provide a visual reminder.”

# How symbols help



“First we do dressing up, then it’s time for a snack. When they have a visual to explain this, the child has some thinking time to get used to the idea.”

It’s easy to add more activities to the first and then boards, for example – first we do some maths, then it’s time to play and next we’ll do some science. You can use these alongside the visual timetable to improve children’s understanding of daily transitions.

Of course, there are times when things don’t go according to plan, and practitioners have to make changes to the original timetable – like an outside play session moving inside because of heavy rain.

Symbols can help children process these unplanned changes too, and it’s worth having a series of weather symbols – or a symbol such as an exclamation mark to represent unexpected events – to hand.



# How symbols help

## Making meaningful choices

Giving children choices is an important step towards building their independence.

However, it can take time for young children to learn how to make decisions about what to do. Using the first and then approach is a good way to help children decide how to spend their time.



Odessa Stephenson, SENCo and Early Years Lead at Monkhouse Primary School, explains how she helps children choose activities.

“There is a lot of scope for children to choose what they want to do. Some love it, others find it daunting and for some, the free choice is too exciting. They dash from one thing to another without really accessing learning.

“**First and Then Symbols** help us direct them. First you can play with the cars, then we’ll work together with some numbers. It is particularly good for children who find it difficult to focus on one activity for any length of time.”



## 2. Promote social and emotional development

For many children, pre-school or nursery might be their first experience of playing with others their own age, and communicating with adults they don’t already know. So, children need to build awareness of how to behave in a social setting.

There is evidence from the Education Endowment Foundation<sup>7</sup> that children with well-developed, self-regulation skills (the ability to manage their own behaviour) are more likely to succeed later on in their education.

The following strategies can prepare young children to thrive in a learning environment.

# How symbols help

## Co-operating with others

Symbols can help to explain why it's important to share toys, take turns and be kind. And when practitioners use them consistently to support positive behaviour, children gain a clearer understanding of what is expected of them.

“It can be challenging to encourage a child to engage and interact,” explains Sophie of Nest Therapy. “It’s something we noticed particularly after the Covid lockdowns because many children hadn’t had the opportunity to play and share. Symbols are tools that work in getting children to collaborate because they keep the language simple.”

One way to embed social skills is by using **Stories to Help** (also referred to as Social Stories). These stories are made up of sets of symbols which are used together to create whole sentences. The stories can be written to show children what to expect and how they might approach different situations or activities.

Teachers and parents can read these with the children when a specific need arises – friendship issues for instance – or to remind children about how listening to the teacher or taking turns will help them.

It's easy to create stories like these to cover any number of situations – playing safely outside, for example, or making mistakes.

Some settings send stories home to help with new experiences, such as meeting Santa at Christmas.



# How symbols help

## Understanding emotions

Concepts such as feeling angry, scared or excited can be difficult for a young child to put into words.

However, if the child has the opportunity to point to a symbol of how they are feeling, an adult can then help them understand and manage the emotion.

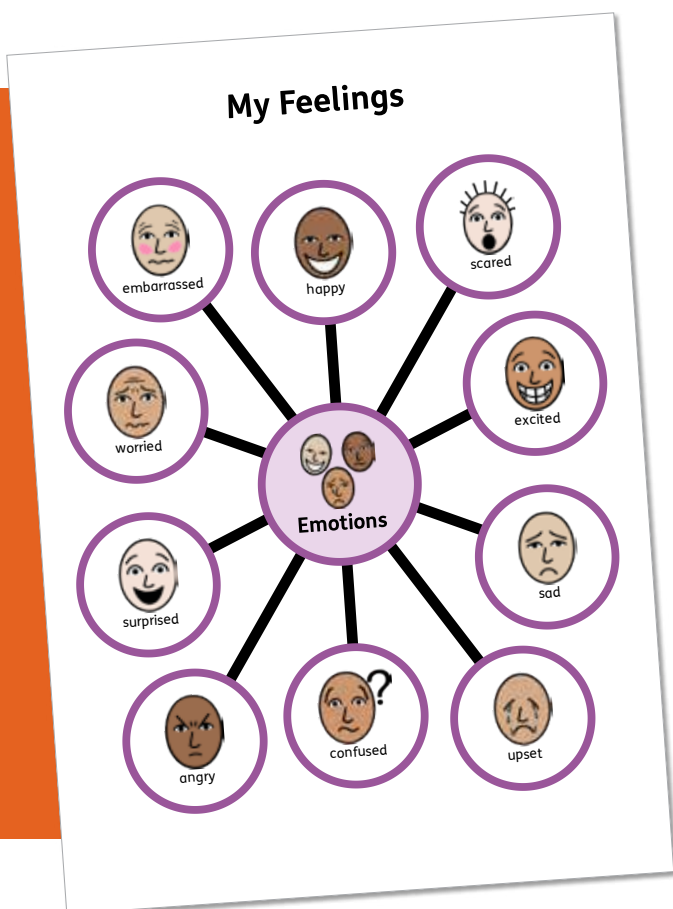
Children can hold up a card with an emotion symbol to show how they are feeling without having to use words.

Some settings have introduced an **Emotions Board** with symbols depicting different emotions. At the start of the day, the children put their name cards next to an emotion symbol to say how they are feeling.

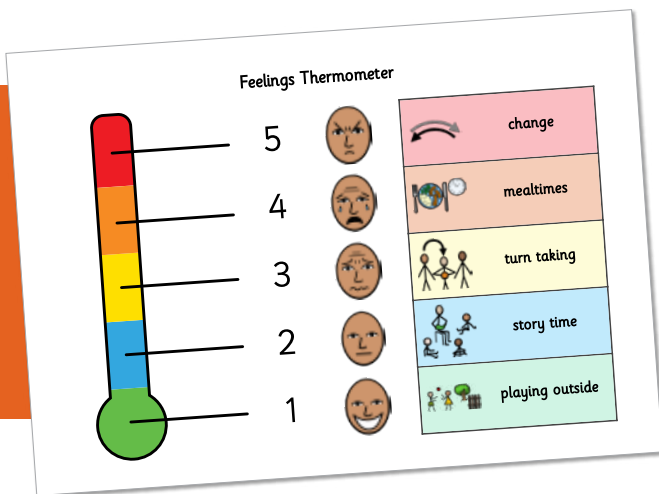
If their feelings change during the day, they can revisit the board to select a different emotion. The board helps the children process the situation, and there are also symbols showing solutions the child can take, for example 'talk to a grown up', 'sit quietly' or 'squeeze a toy'.

Another effective approach is to help children try and understand other people's emotions.

"We help children to interpret the emotions of others by using story characters," explains Odessa from Monkhouse Primary School. "We might ask 'how did the Billy Goats feel when the Troll said it would gobble them up?' and the child can show us a symbol. So, when it comes to helping children with their own feelings, they are already developing that emotional literacy."



# How symbols help



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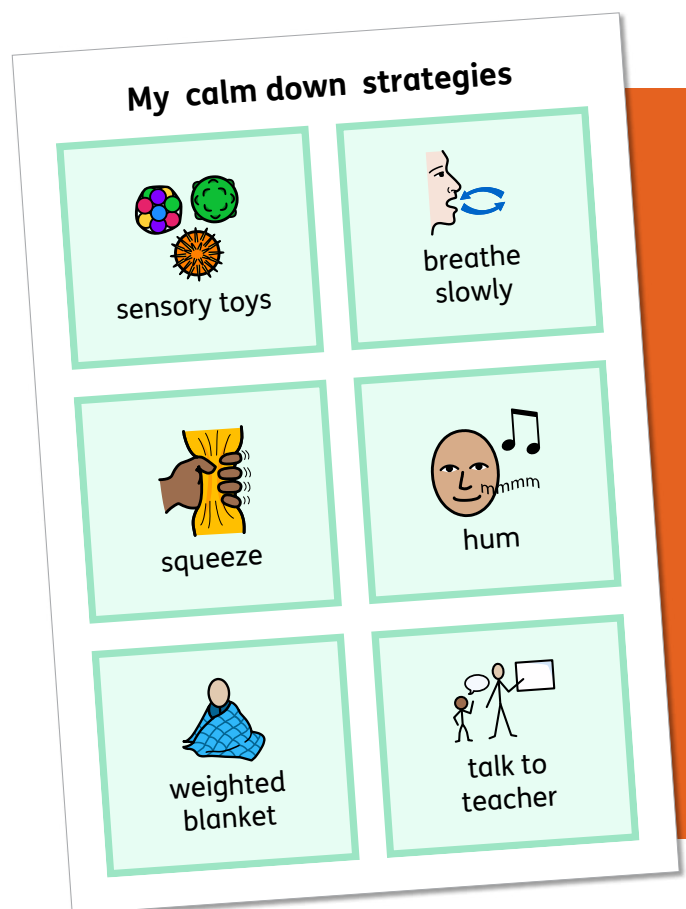
“When a child has become dysregulated, we help them focus on resolution and repair,” explains Odessa Stephenson from Monkhouse Primary School. “This allows children to think about what happened and how they could put it right. ‘You threw some toys around, now you need to tidy up.’ Then we ask ‘what would make you feel better?’ and ‘what would you do next time?’ All the symbols are there to support the conversation.”

## Managing feelings

The **Feelings Ladder** is a five-point scale of emotions which is a very useful way to encourage children to identify and communicate how they are feeling, as Odessa explains. “The feelings ladder helps children understand why they are angry with another child, or sad because Mum was cross that morning on the way to nursery.

“The scale is such a versatile way to get children thinking about their feelings.”

In the heat of the moment, an emotional child finds it difficult to listen to what an adult is saying, so practitioners need strategies to encourage children to control their emotions, such as **Self-Regulation Prompts**.



# How symbols help

## Controlling anxiety

Another cause of difficult behaviour is anxiety, and many children become anxious due to a lack of understanding. Making it crystal clear what is going to happen in a given situation goes a long way towards soothing an anxious child.

Sophie Hutton from Nest Therapy outlines her approach: “We take the children swimming every Friday, and some of the children struggle to understand what will happen which causes them distress. So, we put together a **Visual Sequence** which shows them getting in the minibus, changing in the changing rooms and swimming in the pool. We sent the symbols home to parents and this worked really well in reducing the children’s anxiety.”

Anxiety strikes different children in different ways, and practitioners sometimes need to give an individual child a sign of

reassurance without disturbing the flow of a session. Handheld symbol cards are a good way of doing this.

For example, during story time, a teaching assistant might notice one child looking upset, so they can show that child a card praising their good listening or asking if they would like a blanket or a cuddly toy.

“All our staff have **Key Visual Lanyards** so they can use them instantly to communicate with the children,” adds Sophie.



## 3. Support early learning

Children develop rapidly at the early stage of their education and practitioners need strategies to support each individual child’s learning journey.

There are many ways visual prompts can be used even when the children in a setting are at a wide range of developmental stages.



# How symbols help

## Numbers and shapes

**Labelling** items around the setting gets children used to relating a symbol to an object. Children may be used to seeing 3D shapes in the shape area, so labelling these with a symbol as well as a written word will help to embed the concept of a cube and the word that goes with it.

Sophie Hutton of Nest Therapy uses symbols to demonstrate sequencing. “Symbols can help to build children’s knowledge of numbers and quantity. If you ask a child to collect items and arrange them by size, try showing them a visual which indicates ‘big toys here’ and ‘small toys here’. You can use a similar approach to help children categorise things by colour or shape.”



## Communication and language

Sparking children’s interest in an object is a good way to get them to use new language as Sophie explains.

“Matching symbols to different objects can be fun, and when the children are ready you can introduce the words to go with them. For example, children might have their own baby word for milk bottle, but if we show them a symbol and say the word ‘bottle’ they start to use the correct word too.”

As children get used to seeing symbols around the setting, and hearing adults saying the words, they quickly make the connection and start using the words themselves. Pre-verbal children also benefit because they can demonstrate their understanding on a **Communication Board** without needing to speak.

“Neurotypical children are keen to use the symbols, but it also opens opportunities for a child with selective mutism, for instance, to show they understand a story, or to tell us a piece of news,” says Sophie Hutton of Nest Therapy.



# How symbols help

## Emergent reading

Practitioners can harness children's natural curiosity by using symbols to help them make the connection between an object and the text used to describe it. A symbol of a rabbit with the text underneath it will indicate to the child that the text means 'rabbit' even if they don't yet recognise the letters.



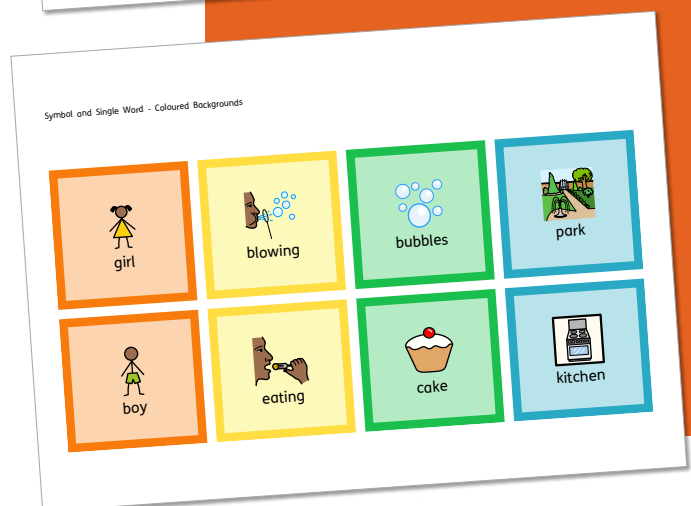
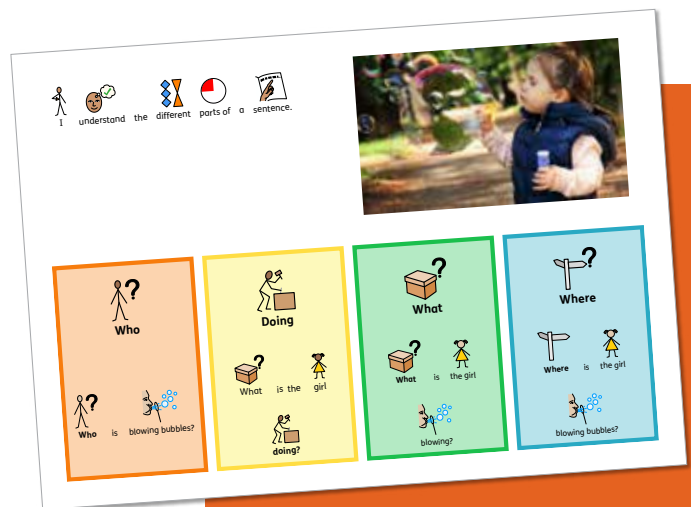
This encourages the child to guess what a word means. They can then move on to sound out the word. Ultimately, the child will be able to understand the word rabbit from the text alone.

“Some of our children are learning to read through symbols because they are interested in the symbols and want to read the words underneath them,” says Sophie from Nest Therapy.

“In some cases children move on to using the text alone. They read the word ‘drink’ and have a go at writing it.”

There are also opportunities to build on children's natural love of stories to encourage early reading, as Sophie explains.

“When children have enjoyed a story, we support them to talk about it further and ask ‘who is in the story?’ ‘What are they doing?’ We have **Colourful Semantic Communication Boards** with symbols to go with the books and this helps children create their own stories too.”



# How symbols help

## Vocabulary development

Early Years practitioners can extend children's vocabulary by appealing to their natural curiosity in the world around them. One approach is to create engaging and exciting small world **Symbol Displays** which include symbolised vocabulary to help children learn and use appropriate language in their play with each other and with adults in the setting.

Using symbols to create **Vocabulary Stars** which include a small number of relevant nouns, verbs and adjectives encourages children to form well-constructed sentences and supports practitioners in the use of consistent language when working with the children.



*“Without a good vocabulary, children struggle to understand what they are taught, to express how they feel, to manage social situations and resolve conflicts.”*

Jean Gross CBE – excerpt from the foreword of Word Aware<sup>8</sup>

# How symbols help

Symbolised vocabulary teaches children to use language in an appropriate context and is an effective way to explicitly extend vocabulary in Early Years as recommended by the Education Endowment Foundation<sup>9</sup>.

Using symbols to boost vocabulary can also contribute towards closing the word gap as identified in the Oxford University Press research report 'Why closing the word gap matters'<sup>10</sup>.

As Kate Nation, Professor of Experimental Psychology at the University of Oxford stated: "Regardless of the causes, low levels of vocabulary set limits on literacy, understanding, and learning the curriculum, and can create a downward spiral of poor language which begins to affect all aspects of life."

When children can build their vocabulary in Early Years, they are better placed for the next stage in their learning.



## 4. Create a positive learning environment

When children see familiar symbols around the room, they become more confident in what they are doing. The symbols create a feeling of shared experience because everyone knows and understands what they represent.

Early Years professionals can use symbols to create a calm and purposeful environment for everyone.

### Signposting spaces

A key step towards independence is the ability to navigate the spaces at a nursery or pre-school. **Labelling** areas, objects and

equipment helps children find their way around, and the symbolised labels reinforce their understanding of what things are used for and how they are used.

Children become more independent as they recognise where to put their water bottle, find the glue sticks or store the dressing-up clothes because there are signposts in the form of symbols around the room.

Consistency is vital when it comes to embedding symbols within a setting, as this helps a child become more familiar with the meaning of the symbol and deepens their understanding of what it represents.

# How symbols help



## A consistent approach

Having instilled independence and learning skills in the children, it is important to keep the momentum going in all parts of a setting, and even as the children progress in their education. Where a nursery or pre-school is attached to a primary school, it can be good practice to continue the use of symbols, where possible, in Key Stages 1 and 2.

“We use **Feeling Ladders** right from nursery up to Year 6,” says Odessa Stephenson SENCo and Early Years Lead at Monkhouse Primary School. “If you change the words and symbols and make them more sophisticated for an older child, they can still be incredibly powerful.

“Further up the school, a teacher might make a whole class feelings ladder, and

when children are ready, they can even create their own. It also leads to some interesting discussions around what each step on the ladder means to each child.”

## Looking after staff wellbeing

Working with young children involves expert-level organisational skills, and practitioners understand the value of providing a calm, ordered and welcoming space for the children. But a positive working environment also does wonders for staff wellbeing and morale.

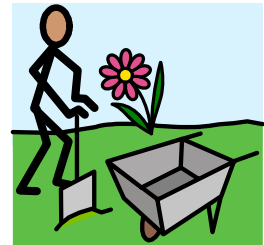
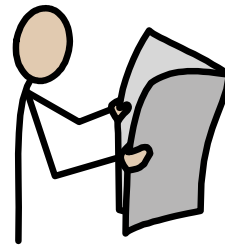
Having a **Symbolised Classroom** can make all the difference to how people feel about working in a setting. Practitioners are more relaxed, knowing they are in control of situations because the children understand what is expected of them and how they should behave. Visual aids give staff the tools to deal with those challenging moments and bring out the best in every child. As a result, this creates a positive environment for everyone.

Sophie Hutton of Nest Therapy agrees that staff benefit from an organised space. “It’s great for us because we know the visuals work. They keep things clear and simple and as a result, we see fewer negative behaviours.”

# How symbols help

## Getting families involved

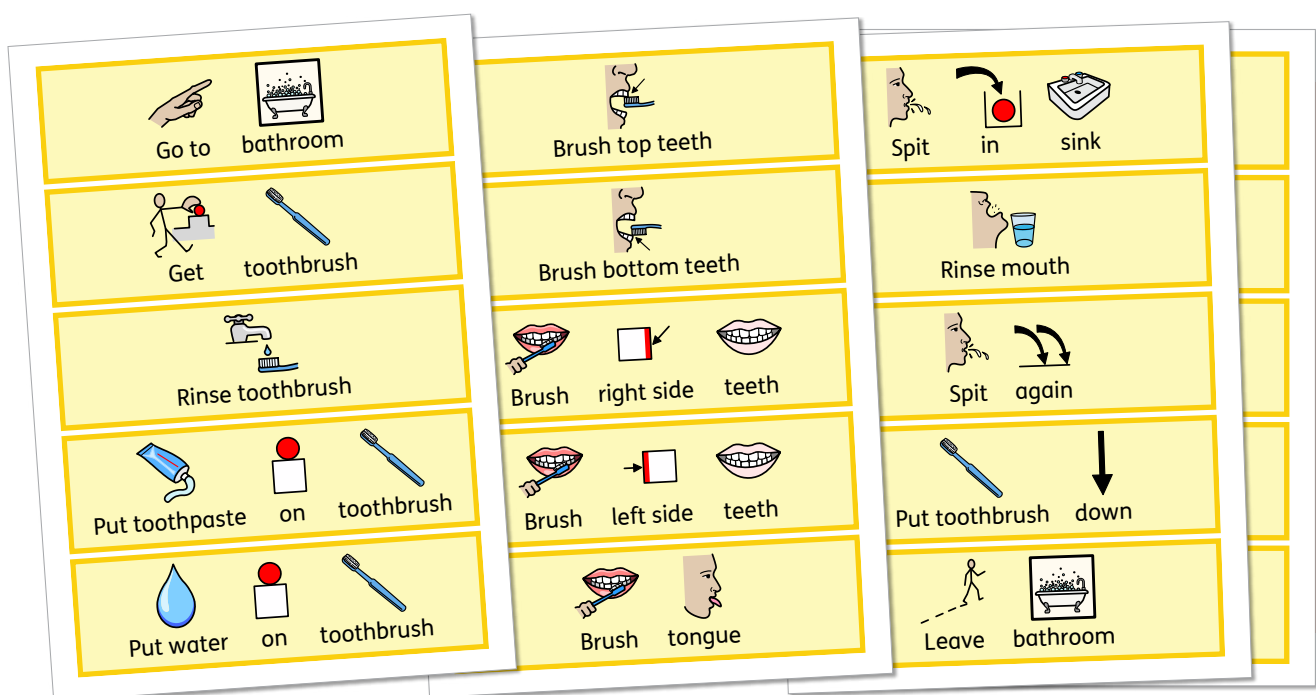
Parents and families are of course a key part of any Early Years setting, and engaging parents makes a huge difference to a child's development.



The Education Endowment Foundation<sup>11</sup> has found consistent evidence that the level and quality of parental involvement in learning is linked to a child's communication, language, and literacy capabilities.

One way to get families more involved is by sending symbolised materials home, such as **Communication Boards** and **Sequences**. When children get used to seeing the symbols both at home and in their Early Years setting, they become familiar with them much more quickly.

"Some families cover their houses in visuals," explains Sophie Hutton of Nest Therapy. "They create boards for snacks, activities and even television shows their child likes to watch. We sometimes ask parents to put together photos of the family doing different things – 'Daddy is reading the paper', 'Mummy is gardening' – then we use symbols to represent them. This encourages children to construct short sentences around the activities people are doing at home."



# How symbols help

It is important to stress to parents that symbols are beneficial for children who are neurotypical as well as children with additional needs.

“Occasionally a parent will express the concern that using symbols at home

will stop their child learning to speak because it’s easier to simply point at a visual aid,” adds Sophie. “We reassure them that children need to understand a word before they can use it, and symbols actually help with the process of developing spoken language.”



# Summary

Early Years settings that use symbols are seeing a positive impact on the development of children's communication, understanding and social skills.

The children have a clearer understanding of what to expect and an ability to process planned and unplanned changes which happen during the day. They are better able to collaborate with and behave appropriately in a social environment.

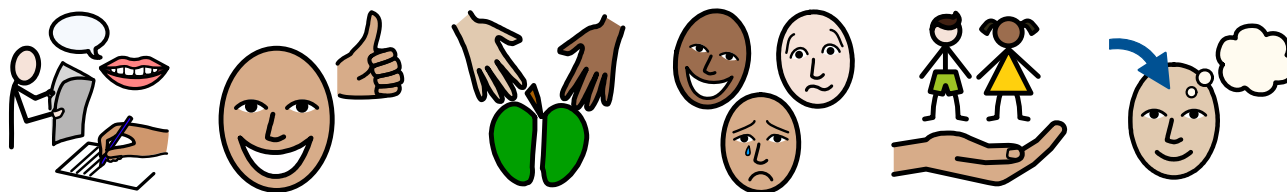
Feelings can run high with young children, but symbols help children identify how they are feeling and find coping strategies to deal with strong emotions. Anxious children are more able to handle situations because they know what to expect.

There's been an impact on early learning too, and children have started to recognise the link between symbols and the text which describes them. Symbols also help children to spot patterns, sort and categorise objects.

Consistency is key. Where symbols are used consistently throughout a setting and further up the school, children have grown in confidence because the symbols have given them a shared language.

An important outcome is how much Early Years staff enjoy working in a symbolised classroom. It creates an ordered environment where everyone knows where things are and what should be happening. The children are happier, and so are the adults.

It's easy to get parents on board because symbols are simple and fun to use with their child. Importantly, symbols enable parents to support their child's development and learning at home.





# Conclusion

The first five years of a child's life are critical to their success, and early education makes a big difference to a person's life chances.

That's why Early Years providers have such an important role to play, not only in giving children the foundations for learning, but also in helping them become socially and emotionally aware so they go on to lead happy and productive lives.

At a time when children's language skills are still developing, symbols enable children to understand situations and communicate with others, even when they don't yet have the right words. And as they build their vocabulary, children will be better prepared to start the exciting business of learning.

A happy, calm, and ordered environment is a pleasure to learn in and to work in – somewhere children feel at home, particularly when they are used to seeing the symbols they know and understand. And if those symbols are used consistently, children become more confident in using them to communicate with their peers, with staff and with their families.

It is amazing how something as simple as a symbol can have such a powerful impact.

In no time, Early Years settings can develop effective strategies to help young children find their way in the new world of learning, playing and sharing – and get off to a flying start.



# Strategy Resources and References

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2. SEND Network: The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young children's communication and language development.

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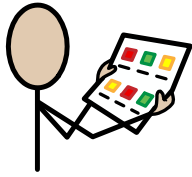
[https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/early-years-toolkit/parental-engagement?utm\\_source=/education-evidence/early-years-toolkit/parental-engagement&utm\\_medium=search&utm\\_campaign=site\\_searchh&search\\_term](https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/early-years-toolkit/parental-engagement?utm_source=/education-evidence/early-years-toolkit/parental-engagement&utm_medium=search&utm_campaign=site_searchh&search_term)

All the resources included in this guide have been created by the team of education experts at Widgit and are designed for Early Years professionals to support children's language development.

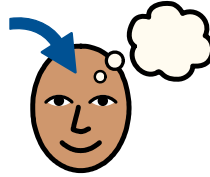
Sign up for a free 21-day trial of Widgit Online and support visual teaching and learning across your setting.



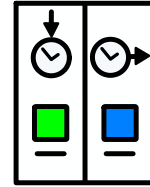
# Nine reasons to use symbols



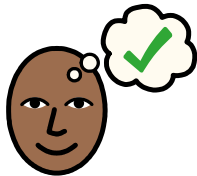
Symbols are permanent  
(Spoken words disappear)



Symbols allow time  
to process information



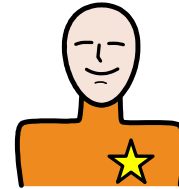
Symbols prepare  
children for transitions



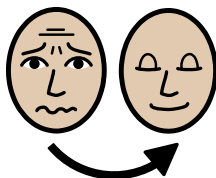
Symbols help children  
grasp the nuances  
of language



Symbols help  
all children



Symbols help build  
confidence and  
independence



Symbols help reduce  
anxiety and stress



Symbols convey  
information without tone



Symbols only include  
relevant information



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