

# Getting Started with Object Communication

by Maurice Belote, CDBS Project Coordinator

**M**any children who are deaf-blind use objects to communicate expressively and receptively, and for some children the use of objects provides them their first opportunities to effectively communicate about the past and future. Objects can represent activities, places, and people. They can be used alone, or together in a calendar or schedule system. If your child or a child you serve currently communicates primarily through behavior, e.g., pulling you towards things, pushing away things, having tantrums, etc., then introducing an object communication system might allow the child to communicate more effectively and thereby be more empowered throughout her or his day. For additional information about objects, see the CDBS website at [www.sfsu.edu/~cadbs](http://www.sfsu.edu/~cadbs) or visit the Project SALUTE website at [www.projectsalute.net](http://www.projectsalute.net).

## **Make sure the object is meaningful.**

When choosing objects for a specific child, it is imperative that the objects have meaning to that child. Objects that are understood by one child may not be understood by another. Quite often, objects that are meaningful to people with hearing and sight are meaningless to people with vision and hearing impairments. While a miniature swing set (to signify swinging) would make sense to someone with visual experience and visual memory, it probably would not have meaning to a child who is deaf-blind. It may be difficult to think of objects that are appropriate to each specific activity. One way to do this is to blindfold yourself and physically put yourself in the space that the child would be in to perform that activity (i.e., when a child is swinging she feels the rope or chain that she holds onto; a child who uses a special chair will feel the fabric of that chair; to signify toileting, think of something the child will do every time such as touch the toilet handle or arm rests on a potty chair). When you are blindfolded and are reliant solely on your sense of touch, you will have a much clearer idea of how activities “feel” to your student and therefore will find it easier to choose meaningful objects.

## **Give the object before the transition.**

Just as important as choosing an accurate object is the need to give the object to the child before transitioning to the next activity. One of the purposes of using object communication is to take some of the surprise and chaos

out of the lives of children who are deaf-blind. When we give the person the object before moving him (or having him move) to the next activity, we have provided him with information about what is going to happen next. If we give the object during or after moving to the activity, we have given him no warning that a change is going to take place and this is just as confusing as if no object was offered.

## **Allow time for processing.**

You’ve chosen a meaningful object and you’ve given it to your student before transitioning to the next activity. Now you must allow the student processing time. Many children with deaf-blindness need extra time (up to 30 seconds, sometimes 60 seconds, maybe even a little longer) to process information they have been given. One or two minutes sounds like a relatively short period of time, but when you are waiting for a child to act on a request, it can seem like an eternity. As you work with individuals using object communication, you will develop a sense of how much processing time each specific person requires. However, this does not mean this time period will remain constant. During times of illness, stress, etc., it is possible that the time required for processing will increase.

## **Make sure objects are easily replaceable.**

The objects you choose for your student should be easily replaceable. Objects tend to get lost, broken, etc., and may need to be replaced regularly. A good rule of thumb is if it takes longer than a day to replace an object, it probably was not a good choice. When objects are broken or lost, it’s important that they be replaced immediately so the child is not confused about the absence of an object. If possible, it is a good idea to get two of each object for the child’s system so that one is available as a back-up if the first is lost or broken.

## **Allow the individual access to the objects.**

In addition to being a system for you to communicate with the student, the student must also have access to her object system at all times because it is also her means of communicating expressively. Objects (and calendar boxes) should not be put up on the shelf and taken down only when the staff person wants to communicate with

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the student. To make this a successful system for the student, it is imperative that she have access to it at all times. This may be difficult to do as other students may want to play with the objects. If this presents a problem for your classroom, it will be helpful to have the child's educational team brainstorm ideas to create a situation that will benefit the student and will work within the classroom structure. You may want to put the student's objects in a fanny pack that the student wears, as a way to avoid other students taking the objects.

### **Remember that some children are tactually defensive.**

Many children who are deaf-blind are tactually defensive; they interpret sensations differently than we do. What may be a pleasurable touch or texture to us may be quite aversive and unbearable to a child who is tactually defensive. It may be less invasive to the child to have objects presented to the bony parts of the body (e.g., elbows, knees, back of the hands) rather than the fleshy/fatty parts (e.g., palms of hands). For example, a particular child may need to touch an object with his foot and elbow before he is willing to touch it with his hands. Some children will allow objects to touch their face before they will allow the object in their hand. The team's challenge is to consider the least invasive place on the child's body to receive tactile input.

### **Make communication a positive experience.**

Objects are often the first mode of communication that a student will use—both receptively and expressively. It's important that the use of objects be an enjoyable and rewarding activity and that it not be perceived as something aversive. If the child is using a calendar box and the child does not like to walk (or if getting to the box is tiring), consider bringing the calendar system to the child. If she is resistant to touching an object you have chosen, consider using a different (but just as meaningful) object for that activity.

### **Be patient.**

The amount of time it will take students to understand and use this system will vary with each child. It may take a longer period of time for some students to begin understanding what the objects signify, and even longer for them to begin to use the system expressively. It is important to be patient and not become frustrated if your student does not seem to comprehend your intentions at first. You will have the most success when the system is used consistently throughout the child's day—at school and at home.

### **Don't stop using objects if the student is not yet using objects or another formal communication system expressively.**

When your student understands what each of his objects represents, this does not mean that it is time to stop using object communication. Objects must be continued until the student is able to use them effectively for expressive communication. Remember that the goal is to create a system that is successful for both receptive and expressive communication. Generally, objects are not the only mode of communication being offered; typically he is being given additional input with sign language, the spoken word, line drawings, photos, etc. Until your student has an efficient and effective communication system (receptive and expressive), don't stop using any components of the system.

### **It's easy to get started.**

Once an educational team decides to use objects, getting started should not be complicated. You can begin immediately using one or two objects that you already use every day (e.g., a diaper, a drinking cup, a spoon, a backpack, etc.). These are objects that may be meaningful for changing time, drinking, eating, and going to and from school on the bus. You can begin with these few objects while the child's team plans the remainder of the objects that will be used. The team may decide later to begin using a calendar box system, but it is not necessary to have a calendar box in place in order to get started with objects.

### **Involve the student's entire educational team from the beginning.**

Consistency is an extremely important component in the success of any communication system. In order to choose objects, signs, spoken words, and pictures/symbols that everyone involved in the child's life will use consistently, a transdisciplinary team approach is recommended. This team must always include the child's family. The child's team can meet and choose the first few activities that are most important to him. The team may want to use the matrix process that is outlined at the end of this article.

### **Include objects for the child's favorite activities.**

Remember that the child's first spontaneous expressive communication using objects will probably be related to a very enjoyable and motivating activity. For example, a

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child who loves to swing may hand you the object that represents swinging, or may choose this object when presented with a pair of objects from which to choose an activity. Because of this, it is important that the object system includes activities that are most motivating to the child.

### **The Object Communication Matrix Process**

This is an example of an object communication system developed by a child’s transdisciplinary team during a two-hour meeting. The information was recorded on chart paper, and then copied and distributed so all team members and others in the child’s life had a copy. The team agreed to all use the same objects, signs, words, and pictures to provide the child with consistency throughout environments. Most teams find it easiest to list all activities, then do all the objects, then all the signs, and so on. This is only an example. Each student’s matrix will look different because it applies specifically to her or him.

**Sophie’s Object Communication Matrix**

<b>ACTIVITY</b>	<b>OBJECT</b>	<b>SIGN</b>	<b>SPOKEN WORD</b>	<b>PICTURE</b>
eat	spoon	ASL “EAT”	eat	Mayer-Johnson
drink	blue cup	ASL “DRINK”	drink	Mayer-Johnson
toileting	toilet handle	SEE “TOILET”	toilet	Mayer-Johnson
computer	mouse pad	ASL “COMPUTER”	computer	photograph of computer the child uses
recess	piece of rubber ground surface	SEE “PLAY”	play time	photograph of play structure
home to school	fanny pack	ASL “SCHOOL”	school	photograph of entrance the child uses
school to home	fanny pack	ASL “HOME”	home	photograph of house
drive in family car	backpack	SEE “CAR”	car	photograph of family car
Raging Waters water slide park	wrist band from park	SEE “SLIDE” with an “R” hand shape	Raging Waters	copy of park’s logo