



# Guidelines for the use of symbols in County Durham schools

**NHS**

North Tees and Hartlepool  
NHS Foundation Trust

**Durham**  
County Council



# Rationale

Schools, The SEND & Inclusion Service and Speech & Language Therapists working in County Durham schools have agreed a set of principles, set out in this booklet, in order to:

- encourage the standardisation of the use of symbols across the authority
- raise awareness of symbol sets available
- suggest a standardised colour coding
- provide guidance for using symbols to support:
  - pupils with communication difficulties
  - the development of early literacy skills.

This will:

- enable the sharing of resources between schools
- promote a smoother transition between key stages
- provide guidance when pupils, with speech and/or language difficulties or using a communication aid, transfer into the school
- establish some basic principles of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC).

Example of symbol use:



## Vocabulary Choice

Choosing the most useful vocabulary for pupils, to enable them to express themselves clearly and take part in lessons, can be difficult and time consuming. Developing and using a Communication Book\* provides a staged approach to developing communication, linked to P Levels, through identifying the core vocabulary that all children gradually acquire. The words, which are used repeatedly, are arranged so that they have a constant position on a page.

Although the staged approach and vocabulary choice is an easy guide to follow, the use of colour for symbols, symbol background and page, as illustrated in the book, can be confusing to pupils and uses large amounts of ink when printing. Please refer to page 5 of this booklet for guidance on the use of colour in County Durham schools.

## Resources

There are many software packages for creating resources with symbols such as;

- Communicate In Print 2/ InPrint 3/ Widgit Online (Widgit)
- Boardmaker Plus/ Boardmaker Online (TobiiDynavox)
- Matrix Maker (Inclusive Technology)

All programs enable resources to be created quickly and easily, with symbols added to words, as required.

- Communicate in Print 2, InPrint 3, Widgit Online and Matrix Maker use The Widgit Symbol Set (WSS). Boardmaker software uses Picture Communication Symbols (PCS).
- Other symbol libraries can be added to the programs but it is recommended to use only symbols consistently from one library set when creating resources.
- In County Durham the use of The Widgit Symbol Set (WSS) is recommended in all settings.

All three software companies provide on-line resources and support.

[www.widgit.com](http://www.widgit.com)

[www.tobiidynavox.com](http://www.tobiidynavox.com)

[www.inclusive.co.uk](http://www.inclusive.co.uk)

# Developing the use of Symbols

A wide range of commercially produced symbols are available. In County Durham The Widgit Symbol Set is the recommended symbol set to use in all educational settings. In 2008, The Children's Speech & Language Therapy Service purchased a licence of Communicate In Print 2 software for all educational settings so every school could use the same symbol set without breaching copyright laws.

It is important symbol use is systematically taught. For some children the use of symbols may be too abstract and they may need to use objects of reference or photographs before moving on to a symbol. It is vital to remember to build in progression into the use of symbols:

Objects of reference → photographs → symbols → text

## Objects of reference

- Are personal to each child, e.g. showing a particular book may mean going to the library or storytime or reading.

## Photographs

- Easily obtainable but where possible, take your own photographs to clarify understanding e.g. the school library.
- Be careful, the background may make the photograph busy and confusing.



## Symbol Systems

### Widgit Symbol Set (WSS)

- Symbols are transparent and easily recognisable
- Uses visually clear formatting for children and young people with visual impairment
- Developed primarily in England, to support the development of literacy and access to the curriculum.





## Picture Communication Symbols (PCS)

- Recognisable
- Some symbols can be very busy
- Developed primarily in USA to support AAC
- Frequently used on communication devices.

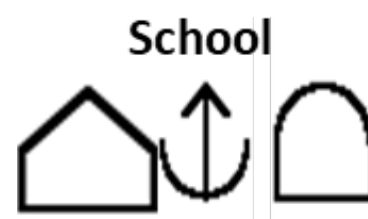


## Bliss

- Created to facilitate the communication between people of different languages or of non-speaking individuals
- The language, which is similar to written Chinese, is meaning-based with graphic representations of the concept behind words rather than being a phonetic representation of spoken language.

The word school is composed of three symbols:

building + give + knowledge



## Signing Systems

### Makaton

- A system where key words are signed alongside speech
- Primarily used by children and adults with learning difficulties
- Illustrations showing actions and some symbols are available.



### British Sign Language (BSL)

- Used by children and adults with hearing impairment
- Does not need to be spoken
- illustrations available to show actions
- These are signs, not symbols.



# Symbol Colour Choice

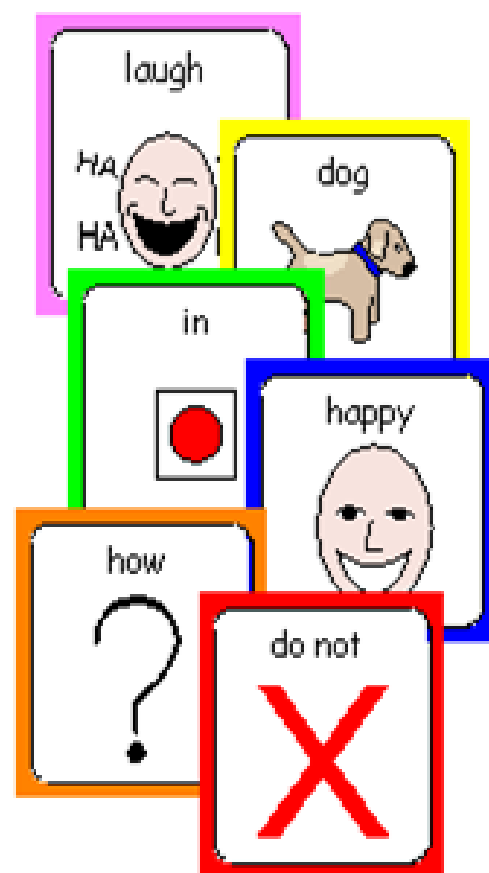
Individual symbols can be black and white or coloured. When deciding which is most appropriate the following should be taken into consideration:

- coloured symbols are more attractive
- black and white symbols may be more appropriate for pupils with visual impairment or autistic spectrum condition
- colours should be consistent across school for each type of word
- different skin tones can be applied to coloured symbols.



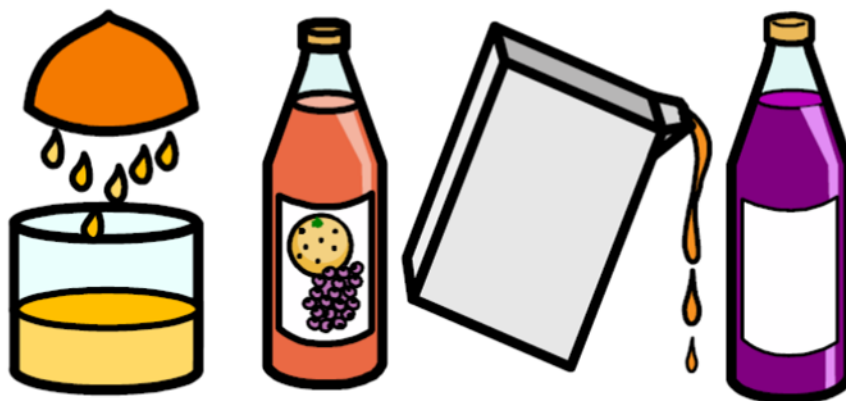
If you decide to colour code symbols, the following is recommended:

- Pink - Verbs /action words
- Yellow - Nouns /naming words
- Green - Prepositions
- Blue - Adjectives +adverbs +sound effects
- Orange - Pronouns +questions
- Red - Negatives.



## Some Basic Rules

- Text above symbol- so text is always visible, even when child or young person points to and/or covers up the picture/symbol.
- Be consistent in choice of which symbol is used to represent each word e.g. there are many different symbols to illustrate the word juice.



- Only symbolise what the child can understand, do not symbolise every word.
- Keep the layout simple, and in the early stages of symbol use, keep a sentence to one line.
- Colour the border, not the background of the symbol, to ensure visual clarity.
- Cover the words before you print and check that the symbols used alone still give the intended message.

I saw the wood.



I saw the wood.



- Add different coloured tabs for each page of a communication book to help children quickly find the required page.

## Training

Schools and other educational settings can request InPrint 3 training by making a referral to the Cognition and Learning Team using the [Request For Involvement Form](#).

## Further information

For further information please contact the Cognition & Learning Team via

Telephone: 03000 263 333

or

Email: [Cognitionandlearning@durham.gov.uk](mailto:Cognitionandlearning@durham.gov.uk)

## Reference

Clare Latham (2004) Developing and using a Communication Book, ACE Centre Advisory Trust, November 2009 ISBN 1-903303-02-8

If you need this information summarised in another language  
or format please telephone:

**03000 263 333**

This booklet was created by:

The Cognition & Learning Team in collaboration with  
The Educational Psychology Service and Children's Speech &  
Language Therapy Departments in County Durham