
Supporting Understanding: Objects of Reference

A clear, simple guide for families

Note: this is a starter guide — we'll be revisiting and adding to it over time.

Why this matters

Before a child fully understands spoken language, the world can feel unpredictable — activities start and stop without warning, and routines can be hard to follow from words alone. Objects of Reference give your child something concrete to hold onto: a physical object that reliably means “this is what’s happening next.” With regular, consistent use, that object becomes a genuine piece of communication your child can rely on, well before — or alongside — spoken words.

What are Objects of Reference?

An Object of Reference is simply an object used to represent a person, activity, or place. With regular use, your child learns that seeing or holding that object means a specific thing is about to happen — a bit like a physical word.

Why use them?

Objects of Reference can help your child to:

- Understand simple, spoken language.
- Understand what’s happening around them.
- Manage changes in routine with less anxiety.
- Make genuine choices between options.

Choosing the right object

Pick an activity that happens often, and that’s meaningful and motivating for your child. Then choose an object your child already uses in, or naturally associates with, that activity. Two children might have completely different objects for the same activity — one child who loves the windchime outside might have a windchime as their Object of Reference for “outside,” while another child who’s all about football might use a football instead. The object should reflect what’s meaningful to your child specifically, not a generic choice.

There are a few different types of Object of Reference, depending on what suits the activity:

- **An object used in the activity itself** — though it’s best to avoid using the actual item they’ll then use. For example, show your child a particular blue cup as the signal, then serve their drink in their usual cup or beaker.
- **A miniature version of the real thing** — a toy car to represent “car,” a toy plate to represent “dinner.”

- **Part of the real object, or something similar to it** — a piece of rope for “swings,” a scrap of fabric from a chair they sit in during a routine.
- **Something symbolic, without a direct link** — a twig to represent going for a walk, a feather to represent rough-and-tumble play.



A common pitfall: some settings use a coat as the Object of Reference for “outside” — but think about whether you’d want your child wearing a coat in the height of summer. It’s better to choose something that works all year round, rather than an object tied to one season.

Talk to your child’s school, nursery, or childminder about which Objects of Reference they’re using, and make sure the same ones are used consistently at home too. Consistency across every environment is what makes this work.

How to use them

- **Show or give the object just before the activity starts**, using simple language alongside it — “wash hands now.”
- **Move straight into the activity afterward.** This immediate connection is what teaches your child that the object and the activity go together.
- **Use the same object every single time** for that activity — consistency is what builds real understanding.
- **Take the object back and put it away** once the activity has started.
- **Once the connection is understood, use objects to offer choices** — for example, holding out two objects and letting your child choose between them.

What to think about now

It’s worth jotting down a few activities, events, or people that might work well with an Object of Reference for your child:

Activity / Event / Person	Object of Reference

Where to keep them

Keep Objects of Reference somewhere consistent, so everyone in your child’s life knows where to find them and remembers to use them. A string bag, an apron pocket, or a small zipped bag all work well — the goal is that they’re easy to grab and carry with you.

Above all, they need to be genuinely to hand. There’s no point in an Object of Reference being locked away in a filing cabinet or an office — if it takes a special trip to fetch it, it won’t get used consistently, and consistency is what makes the whole approach work.

How might you record this in an Individual Support Plan (ISP)?



As your child's understanding of Objects of Reference develops, the target can move from needing adult support to reach a motivating area, through to independently choosing between areas. Here's how that progression might look across three ISP reviews. **These are illustrative suggestions only, not exact wording to copy** – the right target for your child should always be set individually, alongside their setting or a relevant professional:

Starting out: > *[Child's name] will move to a motivating area of the room (snack table/sand/outside) when presented with the Object of Reference, alongside adult support to redirect their attention if they become distracted on the way. They will do this on 3 out of 5 occasions daily.*

Once that's secure: > *[Child's name] will hold the Object of Reference and move independently to the motivating area of the setting (snack table, sand, outside, plus two further areas to be specified), on 3 out of 5 occasions daily.*

Further down the line: > *[Child's name] will express a choice by fixing their eye gaze on, reaching towards, pointing to, or vocalising their preferred Object of Reference when a familiar adult asks them to "choose." The child then moves to the area they have selected.*

For this to be a genuine choice, there needs to be a preferred and a non-preferred option on offer – offering two things your child is equally keen on doesn't tell you whether they're really choosing.

Each stage reflects a step up in independence – from moving with adult support, to moving unprompted across more areas, to actively expressing and acting on a genuine preference.

This guide is one of a series produced by SEND Experts At Hand (SEAH) to help families support their child with confidence. If you'd like us to model this with you and your child, book a 1:1 modelling session – [get in touch].