

Guidelines for Working Towards using Talking Mats

These guidelines are designed to support Talking Mats trained practitioners working with thinkers who may need to take extra steps to work towards using the Talking Mats framework. Remember it can take time for some thinkers to be able to access Talking Mats – patience and preparation is key. Consider setting short-term targets as stepping stones towards the longer-term target of the thinker using Talking Mats to share their views and feelings.

Things to consider

- The Environment: What does the thinker associate with the room being used? What typically happens here? What are the sensory demands in the room? Be aware that sitting close to someone may add anxiety. Consider the position and proximity which works best for each individual. A side-by-side or perpendicular position can help to reduce the pressure on the thinker. Remember to ensure the mat is in front of the thinker. Don't feel you have to sit at a table.
- The Relationship: Who is the best person to communicate with this thinker? Do you know the person well enough to recognise signs of anxiety and distress?
- Timing: Is the timing of this mat a disruption to the thinker's established routine? Think about the duration of the session – some thinkers may need breaks/ multiple sessions to avoid over-tiredness and/or if they have a short attention span.
- Modelling: Some thinkers may not understand what is expected from them initially. Model other people doing mats. This demonstrates that although there is a positive and a negative side to the mat, this doesn't equate with 'right' or 'wrong'. Make sure there is exposure to other people doing Mats without the pressure of the focus being on them. This may need to be done repeatedly and over time.
- Level of Symbolic Understanding: Does the thinker recognise Objects/ Photos/ Pictures/ Symbols/ Words? Be aware that some thinkers may be easily distracted by visual details, for example by matching/sorting according to colour rather than meaning of options.
- Accessibility: Consider the thinker's method of accessing the mat and any adaptations which may be required. Do they have any physical difficulties which may make placing the options difficult? Do they have a visual impairment?

Talking Mats Process

The Purpose

Introduce Talking Mats for practical, meaningful topics relevant to the thinker. This helps achievement of outcomes which are practical and meaningful for the thinker – person-centred practice in action.

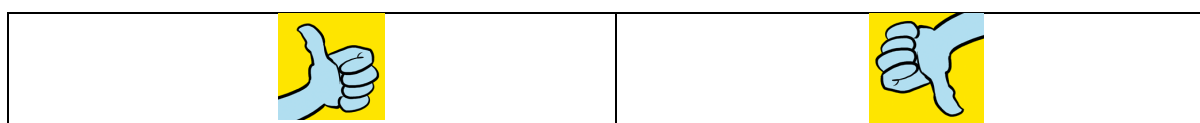
For example, when talking about the topic 'PE', one boy expressed that he didn't like the noise in the hall. Once he was given ear defenders, he started going to PE.

The Top Scale

Start with top scales that will have meaning for the thinker. *Like/not like or happy /not happy* may not be the most concrete/ understandable for that person. These concepts may need to be taught through targeted activities first. If needed, the mid-point can be removed to reduce the cognitive load for the thinker.



Some thinkers may respond better to symbols without facial expressions, for example using just thumbs up/down for a topscale such as good/not good.



Suggested Topics and Top Scales for Talking Mats:

Start with known preferences and immediate/meaningful actions. Use only 3 or 4 options for each mat, if needed.

This will help thinkers to learn the process of a Talking Mat, using relevant topics.

Topic	Top scale
food; music; smells; noises; park equipment	Like/Not Sure/Don't Like
Known Places	Want to go/Not Sure/Don't want to go, Like/Not Sure/Don't Like
Known Activities	Want to do/ Sometimes Want to Do/ Don't Want to Do Like/Not Sure/Don't Like Happy/ Not Sure/ Not Happy
Class work	Can do/ Need some help/ Need a lot of help Happy/ Not Sure/ Not Happy What's going well/ sometimes going well/ not going well What helps/Not Sure/Doesn't help

You may need to teach the language of less concrete top scales explicitly in context. For example, modelling the language at music time – 'John likes the drums, Connor likes the drums, Fiona doesn't like the drums'. Labelling 'like' or 'happy' to the

thinker at a meaningful time is not only good language teaching, but is also a step towards using Talking Mats.

Review and Reflect – Be aware that this core part of the Talking Mats process may result in the thinker feeling they **have** to move one of the symbols. Just review the mat by saying ‘I want to check I understand, you told me.....’ Similarly it may be best to omit asking if the person wants to change anything.

Using **different symbols** from the ones used for timetables, communication aids or behaviour charts may support the fact that a Talking Mat is different from other uses of symbols/pictures.

If a thinker is able to understand the Talking Mats process but is ‘patterning’ options on a mat, you can try using 2 mats and presenting one symbol at a time, then take it off the mat onto a second record mat. Use 2 mats, or 2 areas in a room (see Environment).

Working towards using Talking Mats - Using Teaching Mats:

If a thinker is not yet ready for traditional Talking Mats, you can introduce work on teaching mats.

When using Teaching Mats, you could divide the mat with a line down the middle if necessary, or use 2 separate mats, or 2 areas in the room. You could also consider a Teaching Wall or an interactive white board.

Teaching Mats can support the thinker to make choices. We suggest offering options you know the person likes, and also those that you know the person does not like, to see if they make a choice consistent with their known preferences. This reinforces the learning of the top scale.

Choose familiar topics that are motivating for the thinker, such as food, or TV Programmes. As with Talking Mats, you will need to consult with people who know the individual well when planning a Teaching Mat.

Topic Suggestions (using items that are present so there is an immediate action)	Topscale Suggestions
Food	Good (to eat)/ not good (to eat) Yum/Yuck Like/ not like
Smells	Like/ Not like
TV Programmes	Want (to watch)/ Don't Want (to watch)
Music/Radio	Want (to listen to)/ Don't Want (to listen to)
Nail Varnish/ Hand cream	Like/ Not like (If like - put it on)
Review a particular activity immediately after completing e.g. Cooking, Swimming	Need/ Not Need

Explore practical topics such as 'packing a bag for swimming' or 'setting the snack table' or 'making soup'	
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Remember to use lots of modelling and try teaching mats every day, until it is clear that the thinker is understanding the positive and the negative.

For more information about Teaching Mats, take a look at this blog:
<https://www.talkingmats.com/when-is-a-talking-mat-not-a-talking-mat/>

We are always happy to hear from practitioners using Talking Mats – please have a go - and let us know how you get on.