

Symbol Assessment

(Taken heavily from Beukelman & Mirenda, 2013)

This handout does NOT replace the detailed description beginning on page 158 of the text. However, this handout provides an overview of the symbol assessment process. Beukelman & Mirenda provide forms for each type of assessment.

Purpose: Select types of symbols that meet current needs and match current abilities as well as to identify symbols that might be used in the future

Sampling of Potential Types of Symbols:



Actual Objects



Miniature Objects



Partial Objects



Tactile Symbol



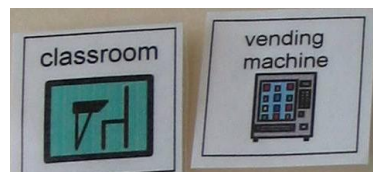
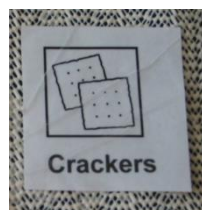
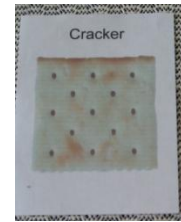
Product Logos & Packaging



Digital Photos
(With appropriate contrast)



Photos
(From various software programs)



Line Drawings
(From various software programs)

Conducting a Symbol Assessment

Step 1: Identify items to form basis of the symbol assessment

1. Identify about 10 functional items with which the person is familiar (could be based on observation or report of family members, teachers, etc.)

Importance of Step 1: Need to ensure that the items used within the symbol assessment are those the individual knows or understands

2. Gather symbols that represent the 10 functional items

Symbols might include objects, miniature objects, photos (color and/or B & W), line drawings, words (and other)

Step 2: Begin symbol assessment by starting with functional use format (most basic level) (Do they use the item appropriately or know the use of the item?)

Can be done by --

- a. Observing in a play context
- b. Providing items and asking "show me what you do with this"
- c. Interview family members, teachers, or others regarding what the individual consistently does with the items or how the person responds to the items
- d. Assessor demonstrates correct and incorrect uses of items and observes person's response/reaction

Success in any of the above methods determining functional use indicates the person recognizes the items forming the basis of the symbol assessment have specific uses.

Step 3: Determine if person recognizes that a symbol represents its referent (i.e., the item)

Assess one type of symbol at a time, but overall might assess several different types

Record individual's responses to each symbol

Assessment of recognition of symbol representing the item can be done in **one of three** ways. It is not necessary to use all three ways; you just want to be sure to get definitive results from one of these methods –

Receptive Labeling Format

Present 2 or more items or symbols of the same type and ask person "Give me / show me / point to (and label one of the items)

Yes/No Format

Hold up one item or symbol at a time and ask "Is this a _____?"
Yes/no questions would be presented randomly for all items

Individual must understand yes/no and have a clear way of indicating a response

Visual Matching Format

If receptive labeling or yes/no format are not effective, then use visual matching

Place one object on the table along with 2 or more symbols (of same type); one symbol matching the item. Ask individual to match object to symbol

Alternative: Give single symbol with 2 or more objects and ask person to match symbol to object

What do you have at this point?

You know ...

1. If the individual understands the functional use of the selected items (i.e., the 10 familiar items selected at the beginning)
2. If the individual can recognize verbal labels for the items or if the person can match selected symbols to the referents

What if the person cannot do one of the above or cannot do either?

Then, the person is most likely at the “beginning communicator” level.

What if the person demonstrates both of the above?

Then, you can use the results to indicate the type of symbol to use (at least initially).

Step 3:

Some individuals respond more accurately during interactions and so Beukelman and Mirenda recommend that this step be done for all being assessed.

Question and Answer Format

As above, use items known to the person (i.e., 10 functional use items)

Select 2 or more symbols of the same type, present them to the person, and ask questions. Use only one type of symbol at a time.

Be sure to ask context-based questions (e.g., “what did you eat for snack?”)
NOT receptive labeling questions (e.g., “Can you show me cracker?”).

Might need to conduct in natural context rather than contrived assessment situation

Requesting Format

As above, use items known to the person (i.e., 10 functional use items)

Usually done in the natural context such as snack, play, etc.

Select 2 or more symbols of the same type, provide them to the person. Use only one type of symbol at a time.

Interact with the individual in such a way that the person is given opportunities to request objects or actions by using the available symbols. You can say phrases such as "I don't know what you want. Can you help me out?" Do NOT use direct instructions such as "touch the picture to tell me what you want."

What do you have at this point?

You obtain information about how the person communicates with symbols. Using only information from the question and answer format or requesting format does NOT give you information about which symbols are recognized linguistically or perceptually.

If the person cannot do either question and answer format or the requesting format or can only do one of the two formats, then it will be appropriate to target these formats as part of the instructional process.

Step 4:

Advanced Symbol Use

Purpose is to assess (a) use of symbols for words other than nouns and (b) if the person chains two or more symbols together to construct messages

Beukelman & Mirenda recommend assessing at this level in the context of a game such as Go Fish and to use dual displays (i.e., a communication display card for the person being assessed and one for the person doing the assessment).

Play the game. The assessor models producing multiple one- and two-symbol messages. Assessor observes how the person being assessed uses his/her display.

Does the targeted person use any non-noun symbols?
Does the targeted person make a sequence of two symbols?

What do you have at this point?

Your results at this level of the assessment process help you to determine if you should begin with an initial system of single-symbol messages with the goal of moving to multiple-symbol messages.

Reference

Beukelman, D. R., & Mirenda, P. (2013). *Augmentative and alternative communication: Supporting children and adults with complex communication needs* (4th Ed.). Baltimore: Brookes Publishing.