

Communication: How Objects of Reference support Children with SEND

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About Shannon Sulston

Shannon Sulston is the Assistant Head at Co-op Academy Delius, a special school in Bradford. She has been teaching there for the past nine years, after completing her PGCE placement in Primary Education. For six years Shannon has been Early Years Lead, teaching in Rockets Pathway where children are supported to have an exciting and positive start to their school experience, ensuring they are confidently prepared for the next stage of their Delius journey.



Communication as a Foundation

At Co-op Academy Delius, communication is not just a tool; it's the foundation of everything we do. It's central to creating a supportive, understanding, and positive learning environment for every pupil. Communication and Interaction are essential to our daily routines and carefully considered throughout our curriculum. Our staff team ensures all resources and classrooms are adapted so our pupils' voices are consistently heard.

Putting Communication First

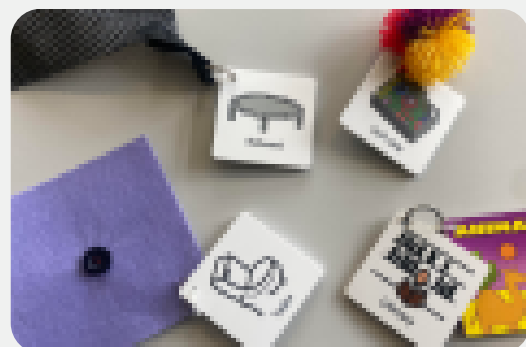
Putting communication first ensures that all our pupils are given the opportunity to express their wants and needs, which can be incredibly powerful! Doing this . . .

- **reduces challenging behaviours:** When a child can communicate what they need or how they feel, frustration often decreases, leading to fewer challenging behaviours.
- **supports children's home lives:** The strategies they learn at school can be carried into home environments, providing consistency and making it easier for families to understand and support them.
- **eases transitions:** Strong communication skills and established strategies are vital during big changes, such as moving on to their next school; helping children feel more secure and prepared.

Objects of Reference (OoR)

For pupils who are at a concrete object level and not yet able to consistently understand or access symbols, we use Objects of Reference (OoR).

Objects of Reference is a tool commonly used in early years education to support pupils with SEND.



What are they?

These are specific, real-life objects that consistently represent an activity or event. For example, a spoon might represent 'dinner time.'

How we use them:

Delius has an agreed list of objects that are used consistently throughout the whole school. Crucially, these objects are attached to both a photo of the activity/event and the corresponding symbol. This helps pupils bridge the gap to more abstract communication as they develop.

Personalising OoR to support each individual:

Each pupil is given their own Objects of Reference bags. This simple step ensures that their personalised communication tool is available and used wherever they go—in the classroom, around school, or on an outing.



Consistency in Practice

The absolute key to the success of Objects of Reference and all of our communication strategies is consistency! When we use the same object, the same photo, and the same language every time, we create clear and reliable understanding for our pupils.

If you are interested in developing your understanding and seeing Objects of Reference as a strategy to improve communication in practice at Delius, **sign up to one of our visit days.**



Reference List

- Bradford District Care NHS Foundation Trust. (2025) Early communication. Available at: <https://www.bdct.nhs.uk/early-communication/> (Accessed: 10 November 2025).
- Education Endowment Foundation (2025) Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools: Guidance Report. Available at: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/guidance-reports/send> (Accessed: 10 November 2025).

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