SYMBOLIC DEVELOPMENT

UNDERSTANDING SYMBOLIC DEVELOPMENT

Symbolic development refers to how we learn to understand visual information over time. It starts at the most concrete level – objects – because we use all our senses (like sight, touch, smell, hearing, and even taste) to recognise them.

As children grow, they begin to recognise pictures of objects, for example in books or colouring activities. Eventually, this leads to understanding more abstract visuals, like written words and symbols.

Some children (and adults) with learning disabilities or certain conditions may not move through these stages in the same way. They might only understand more concrete visuals, such as real objects.

That's why speech and language therapists use different types of visual support, depending on how someone best understands information. Knowing their level of symbolic development helps us create support that actually works for them. Visuals might include:

– Objects (e.g. objects of reference or real items in a visual timetable)



– Photographs (real-life photos of people, items, or places)



– Symbols (like Boardmaker, Widgit or Makaton symbols)

–See below for guide on how these levels develop:

SYMBOLIC DEVELOPMENT

Most Concrete



Real object



Miniature of object



Photograph of actual object



Photograph of non-identical object



Line drawing of object



Symbol of object

Written word of object

Banana

Most Abstract

Thank you for exploring this ADHD SLT resource!

🌈

Created by a qualified Speech and Language Therapist with a neurodiversity-affirming approach.
Enjoyed this resource? Discover more printable activities, interactive games and communication resources at:
www.adhdslt.co.uk
Supporting communication, autonomy and well-being through creative, flexible activities. Scan the QR Code to explore!



adhdslt@outlook.com

www.adhdslt.co.uk

Jamie Louise Hollis
ADHD SLT
Neurodivergent-Affirming Speech and Language Therapist