

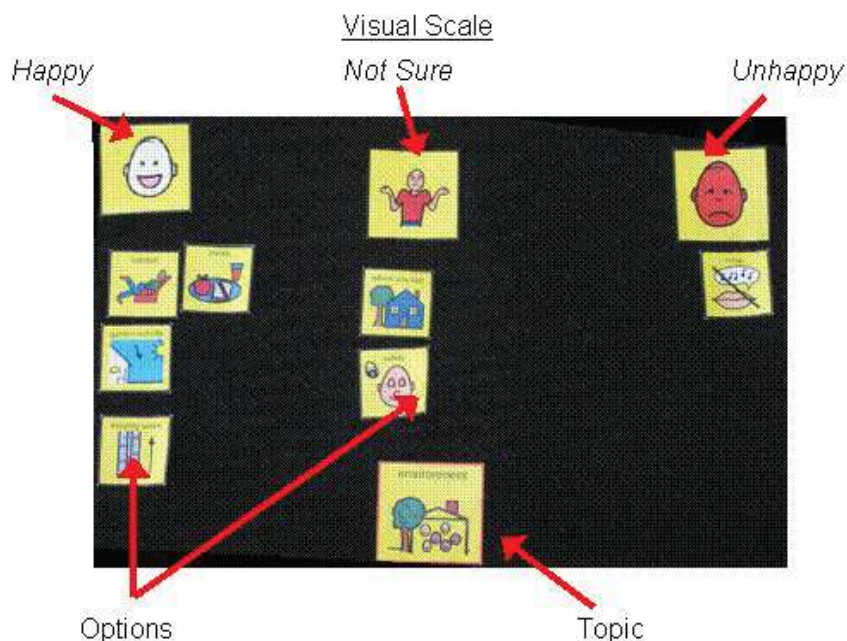
GOOD AND BAD THINGS ABOUT SCHOOL

Using pictures and symbols and Talking Mats

Description

Talking mats (www.talkingmats.com) support children in sharing their views through the use of pictures and symbols to aid their communication, and are used here to find out how children feel about different aspects of schooling. The child arranges pictures on a mat, or sheet of paper to represent their likes and dislikes and the things that help them at school and the things that get in the way, by placing the picture under a symbolic representation of like, dislike and not sure. For children with language skills this can be the starting point for discussion about why they placed the photo or picture there, and how it compares to other pictures. The pictures may represent the following topics: activities at school, different types of lesson, places within the school, people the child works with.

The following example below is taken from the Talking Mats web-site



From <http://www.ascr.ac.uk/documents/TalkingMats.pdf>

This approach is most useful for pupils who use symbolic communication systems or pupils of infant school age, particularly if English is a second language. Pupils can be supported to use their own symbolic communication system, including objects of reference if appropriate, or to take pictures of their school environment, (i.e. the physical environment and the individuals within it such as their teachers, classroom assistants, peers etc) with a digital camera for use with the mat. The more complex the child's needs the greater the level of personalisation so that pictures are meaningful to the child and represent their school life.

The role of the facilitator

- If the child communicates in an individual way, the facilitator should be known to the child but not someone the pupil will necessarily be seeking to please. It is suggested that the facilitator is not the child's teacher as the activity could be viewed as a lesson where there are correct answers.
- The facilitator should be careful not to make assumptions about what the child will think is 'good' or 'bad', and be clear that there are no right or wrong answers. All of the pupil's comments are valid and should be accepted.
- The facilitator should be careful when using encouragements and re-enforcements so as not to 'lead' the child.
- If possible the activity should be undertaken on two or three occasions to establish whether the factors presented as 'good' or 'bad' are similar across time.
- The mat or A3 sheet provides a record of the child's categorisation of important factors regarding their enjoyment of school. The facilitator may wish to record any verbal discussions about this categorisation.

Carrying out the activity

Resources

If using the pupil's own digital pictures: a digital camera; computer; printer; and sufficient time for the pupil to tour the school and the playground before the session and to prepare the pupil's photos of their school environment. Relevant photos may include:

- Child's family
- Getting to school
 - Bus, taxi, parent's car
- People at school
 - Teachers
 - Other people in the school - teachers, lunchtime supervisors, SENCo, LSA
 - Other pupils in your year group
 - Pupils from other year groups
- The school environment
 - In the classroom
 - Aids and adaptations used by the pupil
 - Around the school – including ramps, lifts, steps
 - Outside, moving between buildings, on the sports field
- Things done at school
 - Working together as a class
 - Working by yourself
 - Working with a helper
 - Practical activities – like cooking, playing in the playhouse,
 - Sports, games, dance or gym

A piece of A3 paper, the pupil's communication system or digital photos or two or three sets of cut out symbols. Children may also draw their own symbols.

Introducing the activity to pupils

This activity can be introduced to younger children, e.g. "We want to find out what every child thinks is good and bad about school so that we can help with the bad things. We want to know what you think, not what Mrs X or Mr Y or I think."

The pupil can then be supported to think about **activities** they like or dislike by thinking about their forthcoming week using the class timetable (or calendar boxes or appropriate objects of reference) to aid the pupil's memory.

The following questions can be asked:

- What do you like doing at school?
- What things in the next week don't you like doing?
- What things are you looking forward to?
- What things are you not looking forward to?

Special activities such as appointments with physiotherapists or speech therapists, which may or may not be planned within the next week, can also be brought to the pupil's attention.

Pupils may be offered a range of symbols/pictures/photos to choose from or a small selection, depending on their ability to cope with choice.

The child is asked to select symbols, pictures or photos of an **activity**, and, if appropriate, discuss why they have selected them. The symbol being 'discussed' is placed by the pupil in the appropriate section of the paper to indicate whether they see that factor/person as 'good' (under the smiley face) or 'bad' (under the sad face) in terms of their school experience. If the child has no opinion, then the symbol can either be left at the side or placed under the unsure symbol.

The pupil should then be supported to think about the **people** involved in their school life. Appropriate questions include:

- Who do you like working with at school?
- Who helps you?
- Who don't you like working with at school?

The pupil is then supported to think about the things at school that help them (**aids and equipment, the physical environment**).

- What helps you at school?
- What places are difficult?
- What makes things hard to do?

Adaptations

Instead of positioning pictures/symbols on a mat:

- The child can place individual smiley/unhappy faces directly on the pictures/photos of activities/people and places.
- The child can be invited to "post" the activity in a tin depicting a happy/unhappy face.

Extension activities

If the pupil appears to have strong reactions about certain situations or if there are situations which are difficult every time they are attempted, then this further activity could be developed to elicit the pupil's feelings regarding the situation.

Using the example of 'having lunch', a series of photographs could be taken showing the variety of ways in which the activity could be undertaken. For example, sitting with a friend, sitting alone, sitting with a lunchtime supervisor.

The pupil could then be supported to 'grade' the photographs by putting them under 'good' or 'bad' headings or in between providing an indication of the factors or combination of factors which would improve the pupil's experience of the situation.

Some examples of how schools used and adapted a “Talking Mats” Approach

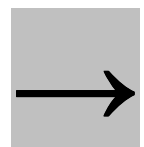
The following examples illustrate how staff have adapted the idea of talking mats to their context and pupils’ needs.

Alex is 7 years old and goes to a **special school**. He cannot speak and does not use signs but is able to eye point, and he enjoys looking at pictures in a book. Wendy, his High Level Teaching Assistant took photographs of him experiencing a range of activities, in different places and with different people. She presented three photos to him at a time and noted which ones he looked at most. She represented the photos he concentrated on most to get a more refined idea of his preferences. At this stage it could not be said that Alex was expressing a view, but his responses suggested that he liked particular activities. These were ones that he appeared to enjoy at the time and she was pleased to see him glancing between pictures of him using the sand tray and that equipment in the room, showing that he had clearly made a link.




Mrs. Crosby working in a **primary school** with children with communication difficulties started by putting out pictures of food and asked children whether they wanted to put a smiley face on the picture or a sad picture. When she felt they understood the activity she introduced pictures of different lessons and repeated the task, then introduced pictures of places and finally pictures of people.

Helen works in the **learning support services** in an inclusive authority with children with autism and communication difficulties. She uses a work-sheet on which are printed pictures of different aspects of school life for rating on a scale of 0 (very bad) to 5 (very good). These aspects include reading and writing, homework, friends, talking, understanding lessons, joining in and listening. The child chooses the area he or she would like to rate and Helen talks about their rating, using a prompt sheet. For example, if the child chose “talking”, Helen could ask whether they like talking in front of the class, to adults, or to other children. She could also ask some of the following questions: Do people ask children to say things again? Do they ask them to speak louder? Do children know what they want to say but forget the words? These questions help the child to think more about the barriers and supports in particular areas of school life.

The following examples are taken from a primary school where every child in the class was supported to complete their own mat:



Sample Teacher Recording Sheet

Child Name:			
<p>Using photos of activities and lessons:</p> <p>What do you like doing at school? What things in the next week don't you like doing? What things are you looking forward to? What things are you not looking forward to?</p>			
<p>Using pictures of people:</p> <p>Who do you like working with at school? Who helps you? Who don't you like working with at school?</p>			
<p>Using photos of environments, equipment, aids:</p> <p>What helps you at school? What places are difficult? What makes things hard to do?</p>			