Q. Why use ... Talking Mats?

A. Communication difficulties affect more than 2,500,000 people in the UK and can arise from congenital or acquired disabilities, degenerative illnesses, mental health problems, literacy problems and personal distress. Based on strong research evidence, Talking Mats is designed to help both children and adults with communication difficulties think about issues discussed with them and to record their thoughts in a visual way. It is used by clinical practitioners, carers and support workers in a wide range of health, social work, residential and education settings.

Talking Mats is an interactive resource that uses three sets of symbols – topics, options and a visual scale – and a space on which to display them. This can either be a physical, textured mat, or a digital space, for example a tablet, smart board or computer screen.

It can help people with communication difficulties to:
- understand and consider issues discussed with them
- express their opinions effectively
- be included in decision making

How to do it...

The key to a good Talking Mat depends on the skills of the interviewer in following the Talking Mats principles, which include:
- considering the purpose and planning the topic and options used with the Mat
- using open questions
- handing the control of the conversation to the client
- working at the client’s pace
- matching the cognitive demands of the question with the cognitive ability and life experience of the individual they are working with
- using consistent language, and
- being able to reflect and adapt their own communication practice and style to match the needs of the interviewee.

Talking Mats training will develop the skills and confidence of an individual in using Talking Mats for a variety of topics, and is available from the Talking Mats Centre.

Pros
- Talking Mats provides a structure where information is presented in small chunks supported by symbol
- It gives people time and space to think about information.
- It allows people to say what they feel in a visual way that can be easily recorded
It takes account of all additional non-verbal and verbal comment.
It is useful for a wide range of abilities and ages.

Cons
- It requires planning time.
- It cannot be used by people with profound cognitive impairments
- It is not a communication aid for everyday conversation.

Resources
- Symbol sets to use with the mat
- Mat
- Talking Mats packages
- Training courses

In September 2013 Talking Mats launched a new range of resources which will further support Talking Mats’ mission to help as many people as possible find a voice who otherwise can’t articulate one:

Health and Well-being which is based on the World Health Organisation - International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (WHO-ICF) and includes 13 topics

Children and Young People which is based on Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) and includes 9 topics

Talking Mats app which has a range of levels from a free taster to the full gold version which includes all 22 topics

New engaging symbols have been specially designed for both the physical and digital Talking Mats.

Top Tips
- Book yourself onto a Talking Mats training course
- Check out the Talking Mats website

Sources and further information
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