DOWN'S SYNDROME ASSOCIATION

Advice on Visual Symbolic Development: the Developmental Levels of Understanding Visual Information

December 2024



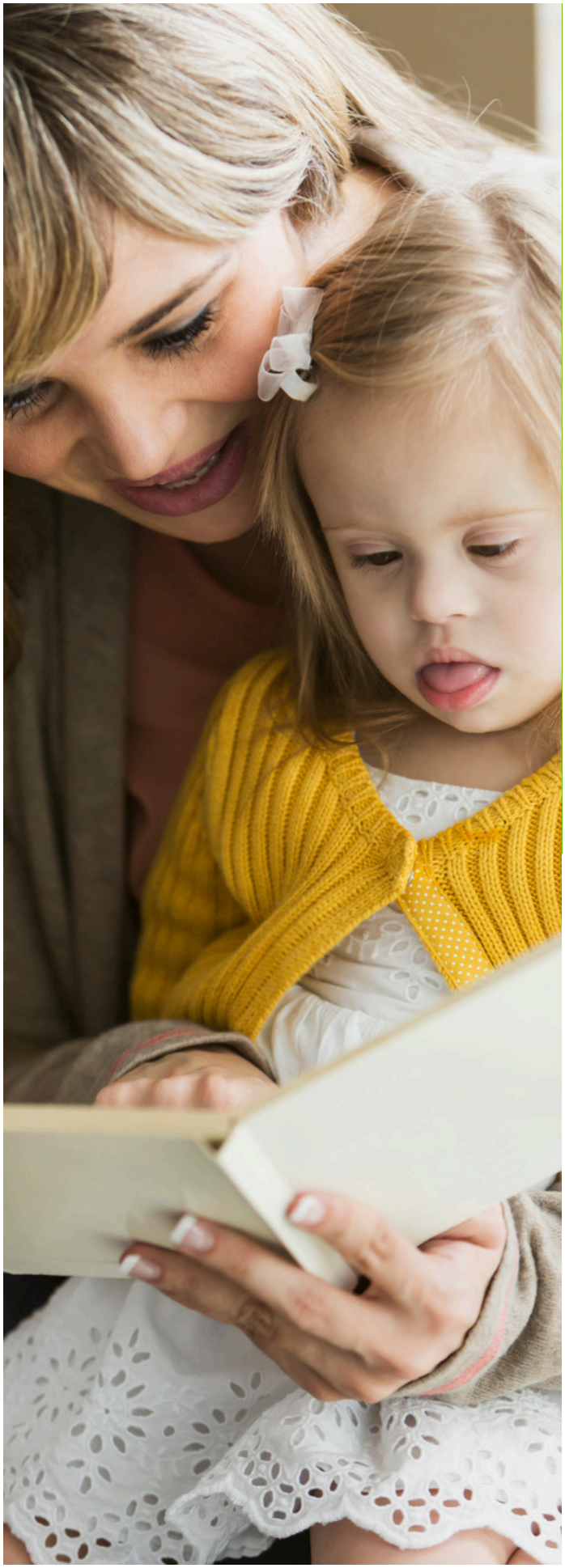
We know that most children who have Down's syndrome will learn more readily through what they see, and will find it more difficult to learn through listening. This is why we make language visual for our children, by using signs, pictures, and other forms of visual support.

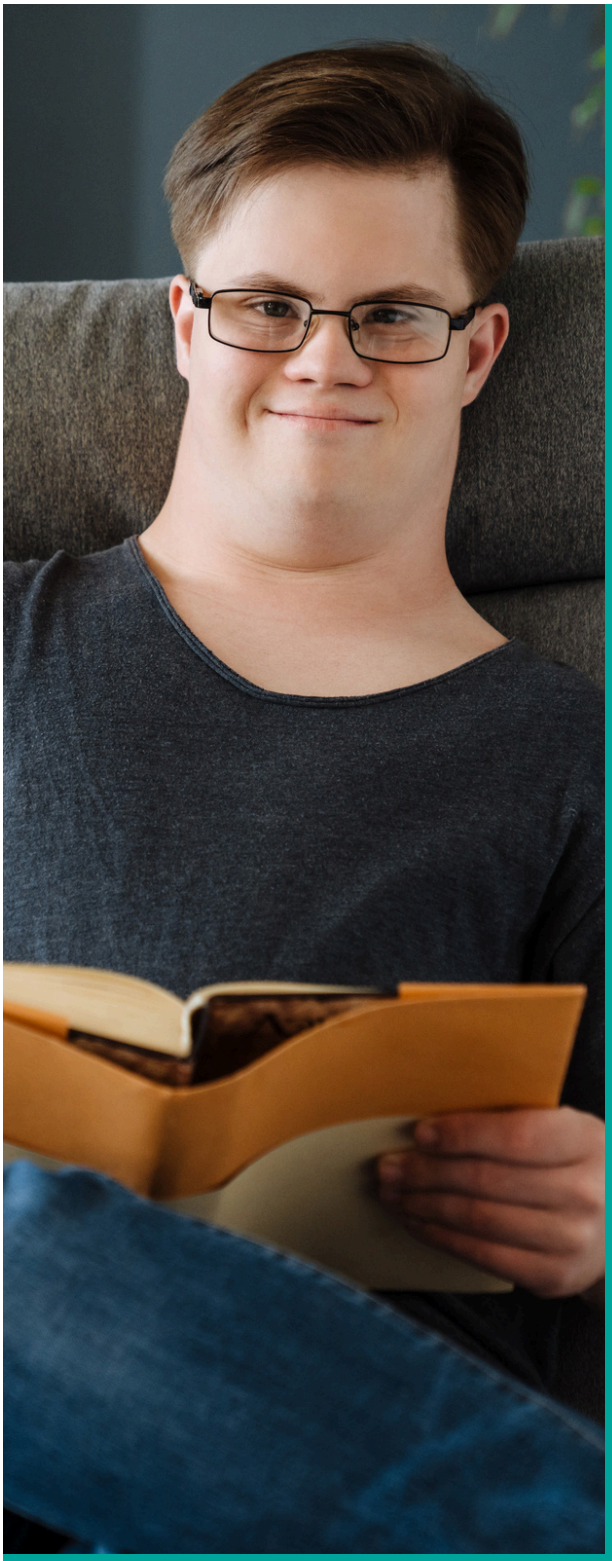
When choosing a type of visual support for our children, we need to consider the child's symbolic development. Symbolic development refers to the developmental levels of understanding visual information.

Our symbolic development starts at the most concrete level (i.e. the 'object' level). This is because an object has a range of sensory inputs that we can explore to determine what an object is (e.g. sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste).

As we develop, we begin to identify objects in miniature form, then in a 2D picture form: first clear photos, then clear pictures, moving towards pictures of non-identical objects and then line drawings. We learn this by looking at picture books and colouring pictures, etc.







As we develop further and enter education, we move towards identifying more abstract symbolic visual material including written text.

Symbols are abstract, and we begin to recognise and identify symbols when we reach the later stages of symbolic development/understanding visual information. However, whole word reading also occurs at the later stages of symbolic development, and has an evidence base for children who have Down's syndrome. So when a child who has Down's syndrome reaches the later/abstract stages of symbolic development, we may choose to introduce written words, rather than symbols.

It's important to be aware that some children and adults who have Down's syndrome will not reach the later/abstract stages of symbolic development, and may only recognise more concrete visual information such as objects or clear photos.

Speech and language therapists often use a range of Augmentative and Alternative Communication methods (AAC) to support their clients. When choosing and recommending AAC methods, it is vital to understand a client's level of symbolic development. This enables us to create accessible information, and to decide if visual information should be:

- Object level - in this case we would use objects of reference systems, or visual supports using objects.
- Photographic level - information would be presented using photographs only.
- Picture level - we would use pictures or line drawings.
- Symbolic level - we would use symbols or written words.

Most Concrete



Real Object

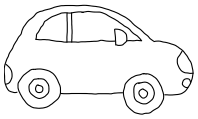
Miniature of the object



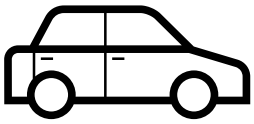
Photograph of the actual object



Photograph of a non-identical object



Line drawing of the object



Symbol of the object

car

Written word of the object

Most Abstract

For further information, please contact us at **info@downs-syndrome.org.uk** or speak to your child's speech and language therapist.



The information contained in this document is up to date as of 19 December 2024 and is subject to change. To find the latest version go to downs-syndrome.org.uk

CONTACT US

Down's Syndrome Association

Langdon Down Centre,
2a Langdon Park, Teddington,
Middlesex, TW11 9PS

t. 0333 1212 3007

e. info@downs-syndrome.org.uk
e. training@downs-syndrome.org.uk
w.downs-syndrome.org.uk

Wales
e. wales@downs-syndrome.org.uk

Northern Ireland
e. enquiriesni@downs-syndrome.org.uk



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