

A Tool to Support Inclusive Conversations: Talking Mats ‘Supporting Communication with AAC’ Resource

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Short Abstract

Talking Mats is a communication and interviewing tool that can be used with people of all ages. It relies on the use of visuals to support open, non-judgemental conversations, giving people an opportunity to speak and be heard, plus reflect on their own life, opportunities and challenges. Values which underpin the Talking Mats process include self-determination, respect, empowerment, neutrality and inclusion. Talking Mats operates through a social enterprise based in Scotland, whose vision is to improve the lives of people with Complex Communication Needs (CCN) by increasing their capacity to communicate effectively about things that matter to them.

Talking Mats offer Foundation training opportunities across many countries. They regularly engage in community consultation to create new resources to support conversations. These are available on a range of topics and for both adults and children, in paper-based form or as a digital web-based app subscription. This presentation will introduce the first resource developed specifically to address the needs of AAC users. The Talking Mats ‘Supporting Communication with AAC’ Resource supports AAC users to have an active role in decision making about their AAC system, ensuring their views are heard and included.

Long Abstract

Talking Mats is a communication and interviewing tool that can be used with people of all ages. It relies on the use of visuals to support open, non-judgemental conversations, giving people an opportunity to speak and be heard, plus reflect on their own life, opportunities and challenges. Values which underpin the Talking Mats process include self-determination, respect, empowerment, neutrality and inclusion (Mundt, 2021).

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Talking Mats follows a specific process, which can be learned during a Foundation Training course. It usually involves several key elements:

- A mat which provides a space for the conversation, where thoughts can be put down.
- A card which represents the topics of the conversation.
- A visual ‘Top Scale’ is used as a framework for the Thinker to express their thoughts on each option presented, this commonly is a 3-part scale but can be as little as 2-parts or as many as 5.
- A series of Options cards which depict the actual content of the conversation. All of these cards include some form of symbol or image, in order to support working memory during conversations.

A Talking Mat usually involves two people, the ‘Listener’ and the ‘Thinker’. The listener’s role is to support the Thinker to express their views and opinions on a chosen topic, through a process of thinking and reflection. Key principles which the Listener follows during the Talking Mats process, include the use of open questions, being non-judgemental, and giving the thinker an opportunity to review their responses and change them if desired.

The visual nature of Talking Mats makes it suitable for individuals at any stage of literacy development. It also supports working memory and attention, and allows space for thinking. The process is respectful of each person’s communication needs and preferences. For example, physical positioning and proximity can be adjusted to suit a preference for reduced eye contact when communicating.

Pivotal to the approach is the notion of handing over control of the conversation to the Thinker, through strategies such as open questions, allowing time for reflection and response. While some Thinkers will physically place the symbols on the mat themselves, those with physical and sensory needs can still have full autonomy in their responses, with the Listener providing partner-assisted scanning or another access accommodation. All of this reinforces to the Thinker that their opinion matters to others.

The Talking Mats ‘Supporting Communication with AAC’ Resource first originated from a collaboration between Ace Centre, the Scottish Centre of Technology for the Communication Impaired (SCTI), and Talking Mats. The intent was to create a resource supporting a person using AAC to express their views about their AAC system. The information gathered would include the person’s readiness to use AAC, how the AAC fit with their specific participation and communication needs, and the level of support they would like. This information could then inform decisions around referrals onto specialist AAC services.

Following a pilot and consultation process with clinicians and clients, the final resource was launched at the Communication Matters Conference in September 2023.

The AAC Talking Mats resource can be introduced as part of the assessment, trial and evaluation process when investigating a new AAC tool or strategy. It can also be used to introduce a new AAC system, to review or upgrade an individual’s existing AAC system, or related to a significant transition event in the person’s life. In all instances, the aim is for the AAC User to have active input in decisions about their own communication. This is crucial to a person’s acceptance and use of their AAC system (Johnson, Inglebret, Jones, & Ray, 2006).

The resource is available in paper or digital form, and can be purchased and used by people with Talking Mats Foundation Level Training. The resource consists of a central topic card, three Top Scale cards, and a set of options cards related to three core topics:

1. Your Communication - Considers the 'How', 'Who' and 'Where' of interactions and helps develop an understanding of the Thinker's communication needs. Helpful when getting to know a person with CCN.
2. Joining in Conversations - Aims to help a Thinker explore how they feel about their AAC resource when joining in conversations, reflecting the fact that an individual often requires a combination of communication modes to be effective. Further discussion can also centre around verbal conversation, paper-based tools and electronic tools depending on the person's individual situation.
3. How your AAC works - Explores ways of accessing the AAC device as well its features, such as functions, appearance, sound, and access.

Adding additional options cards that relate to the AAC user's own context is strongly encouraged, as a way to further personalise their experience.

An Advanced online training module has also been developed, with the aim of ensuring that 'Listeners' can support AAC users to have an active say in decision making about their AAC system, and will have necessary adaptations in place to support these conversations. The course explores each sub-topic of the resource and who each topic might be suitable for. It covers an overview of physical positioning, access and strategies that could assist a Thinker to access a Talking Mat. The course also introduces conversation dynamics in the context of completing a Talking Mats.

This presentation will cover the different elements of this resource, and discuss potential applications and benefits from an inclusion perspective.

Mundt, I. M. (2021). Theories that underpin the principles and strategies of the Talking Mats tool. Talking Mats LTD. <https://www.talkingmats.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Theories-that-underpin-the-principles-and-strategies-of-the-Talking-Mats-tool-060920.docx?x97277>