

"HERE'S ONE I MADE EARLIER..."

PERSONALISED PLACE MATS

There can be a great deal of information important to ensuring that a person's mealtime is pleasurable and safe:

- Specialised equipment, eg. scoop bowl, non-slip mat, plastic spoon, modified cup.
- Modified textures, eg. soft / easily chewed food, puréed diet, thickened liquids.
- Amount of food, eg. amount per spoonful, amount per mealtime, frequency.
- Special feeding techniques, eg. angle to enter the mouth, placement within the mouth.
- Specialised furniture, eg. height of table / chairs, chairs to support posture.
- Protection, eg. plastic apron to protect clothes, napkins.
- Environment, eg. noise level, position within the room, who you eat with.
- Communication, eg. how you communicate pain, or that you want more.
- Choice
 - how you choose eg. from a photo menu by pointing.
- Risks and the help you need during mealtimes, eg. epilepsy, choking, aspiration, supervision, full assistance.

ANGELA CROCKER OUTLINES A SIMPLE AND EFFECTIVE WAY OF SUMMARISING THE INFORMATION THAT CAN HELP ADULTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES TO POSITIVE, SAFE AND SUCCESSFUL MEALTIMES.

How are they useful?

- When helping people with high support needs it ensures that the often-large amount of important information is easily accessible.
- They promote consistency and good communication.
- Having a photograph of a person's special equipment allows the equipment to be accessed quickly and accurately.

• New, unfamiliar caregivers can check the mat for important information. This can be particularly useful when a person is eating out in the community, is on holiday, or when familiar caregivers are not available.

- They allow a person with communication difficulties to advocate for him or herself.
- They increase knowledge of essential safety issues. This is particularly important for people who have specific difficulties at lunchtime, for example someone who is at risk of choking or aspiration.

- The mat can act as an object of reference (Ockelford, 2002; Park, 2002) to tell someone it is lunchtime, or to encourage them to request lunch.

- The mat can provide a contrasting visual border for people with visual difficulties.
- Having the place setting outlined on the mat can help people with autism set up their own place independently.

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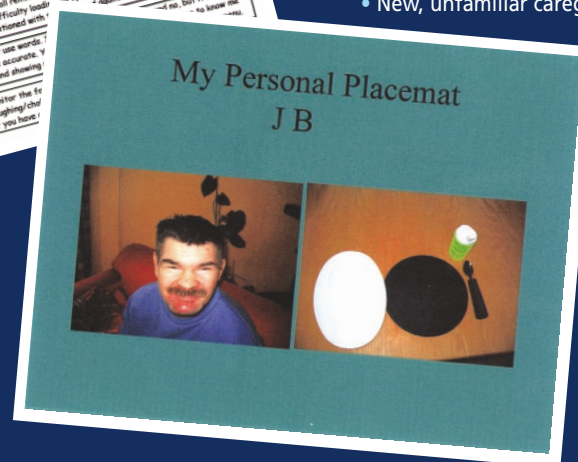
"We find the placemats very useful, especially when new staff are joining the team. Many have commented on how informative they have been, in providing the specific information required to assist individual clients at mealtimes." Christine Noble and Joanne Cromwell, Day Care Workers.

References

Murphy J. (1998) Talking Mats: Speech and language research in practice. *Speech and Language therapy in Practice* Autumn: 11-14. (Reprinted in full at www.speechmag.com/archives/joanmurphy2.html.)
Ockelford, A. (2002) Objects of Reference. London: RNIB.
Park, K. (2002) Objects of Reference in Practice and Theory. London: Sense.

Resources

The Picture Communication Symbols (PCS) are (c)1981-2004 Mayer-Johnson Co., PO Box 1579, Solana Beach, CA 92075, USA. Boardmaker(tm) software is available in the UK from Don Johnson Special Needs, tel. 01925 241642.



For some people with communication difficulties, telling others this information can be difficult. We have therefore developed Personalised Place Mats and found them useful as a quick, accessible reference; most importantly, they have led to more pleasurable and successful mealtimes for our clients.

How is the information gathered?

Through assessment, discussions and observations. An excellent low-tech communication framework 'Talking Mats' (Murphy, 1998) is also a useful tool to enable people with communication difficulties to express opinions about their mealtimes.

How is the information presented?

It is simplified and written in the first person. A symbol key is used to break the information up, so that it can be located easily. It is presented in the sequence of how it will be needed during a mealtime. We use the Boardmaker™ software package along with digital photographs to create the place mats.

The symbol is placed on the left-hand side and the relevant written information is boxed on the right hand side.

A picture of the person's choice is placed on the reverse side. This picture can be a

- drawing by the person,
- photo of the person and / or their equipment
- things they like to talk about,
- an aid to help support communication
- a visual reminder of something they need to do at mealtimes.

Most place mats are A4 size. We laminate them so that they are durable and easily wiped clean.

Where are they kept?

People can choose to keep their mat private and select who they show it to. Alternatively people can use their mat at mealtimes with the confidential information placed face down and the picture face up.

