Shape Coding

What is Shape Coding?

Shape Coding is a system designed by Speech and Language Therapist Dr Susan Ebbels, and it was used to help teach spoken and written grammar to children with Developmental Language Disorder (DLD). It has since been developed and progressed to help children and young people with language disorders, children with hearing impairment, children with Down syndrome and adults with language difficulties after a stroke.

The Shape Coding system uses a visual coding system to show a child the rules for how words are put together in sentences, to develop the child’s understanding of spoken and written grammar, and to develop their ability to use grammar successfully to express themselves.

How does it work?

The system uses colours, arrows and shapes to give visual representations for sentence structure. Colours are used to represent parts of speech, arrows to represent tense and aspect, and shapes to represent syntactic and argument structure.

**Parts of speech and their colours:**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Colour** | **Name** | **Example** |
| Red | Nouns/pronouns | Boy, table, I, you |
| Pink | Determiners/possessive pronouns | The, a, my |
| Blue | Verbs | Push, melt, kick, jump |
| Green | Adjectives | Hard, sad |
| Yellow | Prepositions | In, on, under, through |
| Brown | Adverbs | Quickly, carefully, slowly |
| Purple | Coordinating conjunction | And, but, or |
| Orange | Subordinating conjunction | Because, if |

These are the shapes used for the different grammatical parts of the sentence:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Noun Phrase: SubjectThe item/person performs the actionWho What? | Noun Phrase: ObjectThe item/person that receives the actionWho What? |
| Auxiliary or Modal VerbBe, do, can, may, shall, is, are, would | Verb PhraseWhat doing? |
| Adjective PhraseWhat Like? How Feel? | Prepositional PhraseWho What? |
| How?Why?When? |

As children became more able to use this system other elements can be added to make these sentences more grammatically complex…

Arrows are used beneath verbs to show the tense e.g.

Present Tense Past Tense

Pink lines are placed below determiners (e.g. ‘the’, ‘a’, ‘one’, ‘first’, ‘most’, all’)

Double lines are also used to indicate plurals e.g. cat vs cats

Shape Coding can help children learn the basic grammatical structure of sentences to use in structured settings, such as in lessons, as well as spontaneously. Children will often only start out with simple sentences, such as:

eats

Ben

crisps

And allows them to develop their skills with visual representation to form more complex sentences, such as:

The happy boy

is

putting his chocolate cake on her plate

This sentence includes the use of arrows to show tense, as well as showing the phrase structure of a sentence. The above sentence includes a noun phrase embedded within a prepositional phrase, and another noun phrase within a verb phrase, as well as the zig-zag arrow showing the present participle in ‘putting’.

This shows how Shape Coding can give visual representations to very complex language.