

Thematic PhotoBooks

The logo is a purple oval containing a white silhouette of a person on the left holding a camera up to their eye, and an open book on the right. The book's pages are depicted with simple line drawings of text blocks. The word 'Thematic' is arched above the oval, and 'PhotoBooks' is arched below it, both in a dark brown, serif font.

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The Thematic PhotoBooks Method

A Learning Process for Exceptional Children

By Dina Veksler and Anna Ranish, M.S.Ed.

A picture is worth a thousand words, and sometimes, as in the case of exceptional children, worth many more.

For children with different learning styles, especially those with developmental disabilities, using a visual system to explain concepts is highly successful. It's not uncommon to enter a classroom and see a visual schedule detailing the events of the day planned for all the children.

In fact, research supports visual strategies, including the use of cameras, as a way of adapting lesson plans. One researcher gave children with autism cameras, asked them to take photographs, and then share the results with the group. She found that not only did the children excel in the assignment, but they showed greater joint attention and less reliance on verbal instruction. Giving children opportunities to take photographs and talk about the images were strategies that made learning fun and interesting. Central to this exercise was that the adapted environment made it easy for learning to happen naturally.

What is the Thematic PhotoBook?

Simply put, Thematic PhotoBooks are similar to traditional books in many ways. They can be entertaining and funny; teach concepts or give new information; and tell a story. The main difference, however, is that a Thematic PhotoBook in our method is created with a child as an active participant, and he is the main character of the book. This book is about a child and his world, and that makes it easier for him to relate to the content of the book.

Creating a Thematic PhotoBook is a gradual process, done in cooperation with an adult, and relies on the child's readiness and skills. Photos are put into a PhotoBook that describes a certain theme or a story. By creating his own book, a child gradually learns necessary skills like cutting, gluing, and designing a page's layout. This system relies on the relationship between parent and child, as well as teacher and child, to motivate, encourage, and celebrate the child's efforts.

"One of the most profound mysteries of autism has been the remarkable ability of most autistic people to excel at visual spatial skills while performing so poorly at verbal skills."

Temple Grandin, 2006



The Thematic PhotoBooks Method is:

- An opportunity to learn new skills and concepts while being engaged in productive activities;
- An opportunity for a child to develop a stronger interpersonal relationship with others;
- A way he can express creativity, independence, and self-reliance without relying on verbal skills;
- A tool to increase fine motor skills and hand-eye coordination, and lengthen attention span and focus;
- A resource that can be used again and again, or expanded upon to target a new learning goal;
- A fun way to develop expressive language and descriptive skills; and
- A source of pride and feeling of accomplishment for the child.



Photo 1: Kate gets a closer look at a flower.

Kate: Motivated to Learn Naturally

Kate is a twelve-year-old girl with physical and intellectual disabilities that limit her ability to perform daily activities. Although her health is fragile, her spirit is very strong. Kate has many interests, and loves to learn new things. One of her favorite learning tools is a camera.

When we worked with Kate, our goal was to use her fascination with the camera to motivate her to make efforts she would not ordinarily make. For example, Kate would get out of her stroller (which she normally wouldn't do), walk in search of a beautiful flower, and then bend over in order to take a better picture of it [Photo 1]. The camera became a reward for putting up with her feeding and therapy routines.

One of the PhotoBook projects Kate worked on was on the theme of shapes. She worked on finding different shapes in her neighborhood — a round flower, an oval bush — and taking pictures of them. She pasted the pictures into her PhotoBook, and wrote the words “square” or “round” next to each photo. When Kate created labels for her pictures, and then matched the labels with the pictures, she learned to read these labels aloud. This way, the photos facilitated reading comprehension.



Photo 2: Page from Shapes PhotoBook.

Because Kate was learning to read and count in school, we added those goals into the camera work. We asked her to photograph something that appeared in twos and another that appeared in threes, such as two flowers and three bushes. Later, she pasted these pictures into her PhotoBook, where she counted out loud: "One, two, three," as she pointed to her pictures.

We saw an amazing effect on Kate's self-confidence. Her teacher showed the students a PhotoBook on the theme of shapes [Photo 2]. "These shapes are in our neighborhood," she

explained. "This PhotoBook, which demonstrates shapes, was made by one of you," pointing to Kate. The other students applauded Kate, and she smiled proudly. The camera had become Kate's ally and her partner, making it possible for her to take her place in the classroom community.

Like many other exceptional children, Kate had challenges in hand-eye coordination and fine motor skills. Looking through the viewfinder promoted her own ability to focus and pay attention. For example, Kate had to take a picture of the same tree three times before she was able to include the entire tree in her photograph. With each attempt, she could see her mistake and try to fix it. Because she was so involved with the task, she didn't notice that it was somewhat of a tedious process.

Mike: Supporting Positive Behaviors

Mike is a seven-year-old creative and mischievous boy. In order to address Mike's inappropriate behaviors, we introduced the concept of black and white folders. If we observed Mike engaged in a "bad" behavior, such as throwing toys or yelling at his sister, we took pictures of him in that moment. Later, we described an alternative "good" behavior, such as putting his toys away or hugging his sister, and asked him to perform

it in front of the camera. “Bad” pictures went into the black folder, and “good” ones went into the white.

Mike loved to look at the pictures in his two folders. He enjoyed creating the folders by cutting pictures and pasting them onto the pages [Photo 3]. We noticed that he loved to talk about at the pictures in the white folder, but didn’t like the way he looked in the black folder. His parents got involved in the activity by praising Mike as they began to see more photos in the white folder, and less in the black one.



Photo 3: Mike assembles his Behaviors

Another area in which Mike showed vast improvement was in his attention span. Whereas it was usually wild and roaming, having to focus on the details of the camera work helped him calm down. He paid careful

attention when composing a picture. For example, Mike liked cats and enjoyed capturing interesting images of them whenever he saw one. This required his undivided attention and patience, as well as a timely response. Eventually, Mike became the “family photographer,” taking photos at family events and sharing them with others. Mike was happy and proud of the responsible role that he had begun to play in the family.

- Engage and motivate a child in a photo activities necessary for creating PhotoBooks;
- Choose a theme tailored to his abilities, interests, and personality;
- Create a progressive learning environment by breaking down concepts and teaching them in succession;
- Help him discover new interests and skills that weren’t evident; and
- Use PhotoBooks to introduce new themes and topics.

Strategies Used in the Thematic PhotoBooks Method

Again, the following strategies can be used to target learning goals when creating PhotoBooks:

There are so many benefits to the use of a camera with exceptional children. Mike's example showed that it can successfully target undesirable behaviors and build confidence. In Kate's case, her own motivation allowed us to teach progressively harder skills and concepts.

We have successfully used this method with non-verbal children who struggle to hold the camera. For example, in our work with a non-verbal boy with autism, we were able to gain his attention by using a camera. Even though he was easily distracted and stilled much of the time, we achieved some eye contact and even get him to smile for a picture. This simple activity can serve as the beginning of an interpersonal bond between a child and an adult, and an opportunity for further communication and learning.

Social Interaction: An Important Source of Learning

Possibly the most satisfying achievement for parents and teachers is the growing social interaction with the child. The Thematic PhotoBooks Method is designed to facilitate a long, productive interaction. In the beginning, the main focus is on creating a bond between the child and the adult, giving interactions a feeling of an exciting journey. As the project progresses, opportunities for new roles come up. The child begins assuming more of a partner role by taking on more responsibilities and performing more tasks independently. In the group setting, we've seen that interactions often shift from teacher and student to being between students themselves, allowing them to learn from each other and take turns. For children with social challenges, the benefits are endless!

In short, the Thematic PhotoBooks Method helps to reveal the potential of exceptional children to have a creative involvement in their world. Instead of being a teaching method, it creates a positive, supportive, and engaging environment in which a child will learn naturally and easily, using his own interests.