

The value of the 'Blob pictures' tool

TN155 Training Notes series: Management

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What I am calling a 'Blob picture' is an image of a range of cartoon characters (Blobs) in a variety of poses within a setting that links them all together. You will see examples on the pages that follow.

The idea for this brilliant and widely-used tool comes from the early 1980s when Christian youth worker Pip Wilson and artist Ian Long devised the Blob Tree. This was a picture of a tree in which about 20 Blobs (looking a bit like Gingerbread people) were sitting or climbing or swinging from a branch.

This was a visual tool designed for individuals to express their feelings without having to use printed words. You simply pick the Blob that most closely matches your emotions at that moment, and then can be asked to explain why you chose that one.

Pip Wilson used it for young people who were not good at reading to open up about themselves. It spawned a number of variations from the same team – I show three examples on the following pages. The tool has been widely used by many people since then in counselling, school classrooms, youth work, business meetings and training events. You may well have come across some of these pictures or seen the original in use in a professional work setting. For details, see <https://www.blobtree.com>.

The Blobs are genderless, ageless and culture-less so anyone can identify with each of them. The success of this tool is down to its simplicity and universality. And, of course, the idea is great fun to use!

You can use the tool if you pay for a licence or you can purchase individual Blob pictures from the catalogue icon on the website. There is also a free user guide.

My purpose in writing these Training Notes is to explain that I have used this tool for many years and would encourage churches to use it too.

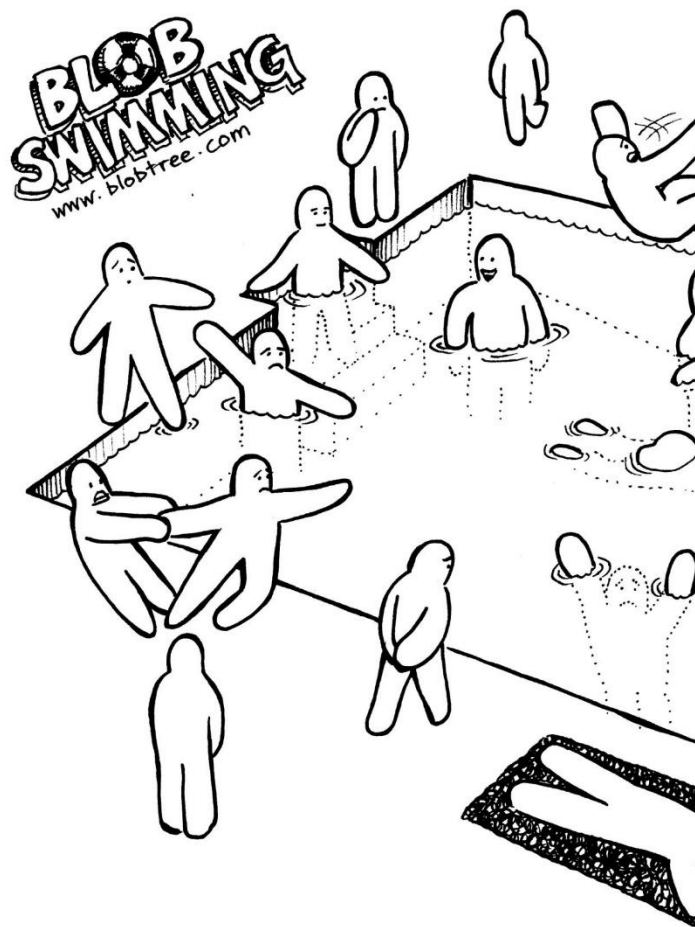
Note that the Blob pictures shown in these Training Notes are only either the top half or the left hand half of the actual cartoon. This is to comply with the requirements of the copyright holder for an internet article.

Example 1: swimming pool

Here is the swimming pool Blob.

You give out sheets with this picture on them at the end of a training event when you have been dealing with a new idea and you now need to turn to action.

But how are people feeling about this? Ask them and a few will give you straightforward answers but others may stay silent or simply say, 'Fine' – when they may not be fine about the issue at all.



Instructions to participants

- 1 Study the picture and check out all the characters (Blobs) you can see in it.
- 2 Choose the ONE character which you most closely identify with at the moment *(in how you feel about the actions we propose to take, or the situation we have discussed, or just in general)*.
- 3 Draw a ring round that character – and be ready to tell the group which one you have put your ring around.
- 4 *Allow a couple of minutes – there is usually quite a bit of laughter as people study the picture and some may giggle about one character being just like someone else they know.*
- 5 *Then go round the circle (a good seating layout for this exercise) and everyone says (1) which one they put their ring around and (2) why they chose that one.*
- 6 *Do not allow any comment from the group but when everyone has expressed themselves you might allow questions for group members of each other.*
- 7 *You might then ask what the exercise has shown up for the group as a whole.*

If you are the enabler of this exercise, watch out for anyone who might find this upsetting because it enables them to say something in public they have never had the courage to say before. Be sensitive to the body language within the group.

It is of course 'the reasons why' that you are noting. Sometimes two people will pick the same Blob for very different reasons. That is fine. Again two people may pick a different Blob for the same reason. Fine again. **The Blob they pick is not the point.** It acts as a hook on which they can then hang their expressed feeling.

Once when I used this idea one person ringed a blank stretch of water in the pool. When asked why, they said because they felt as though they had already drowned. That actually showed up a serious issue which needed to be followed up.

The picture has allowed people to express feelings, whether of fear or uncertainty, or of excitement and anticipation, and to do so with honesty. Without the Blob of their choice they would find it much harder to come out with their real emotion.

Two other examples

Here is the top half of the gardens Blob and, on the next page, the beach Blob picture.

As with the swimming pool, these two each contain a range of activities so there is plenty of choice when asked to pick one Blob. I especially like the Blob in the garden scene mending the fence, (or are they just peering through the gap in the broken fence, or what exactly are they doing?).



The top half of the Gardens Blob Picture

Extending Blob use

There are other questions you can ask which allow people to select a Blob. So far I have suggested,

- 'Which Blob do you most closely identify with at the moment?'

But it might be helpful to ask as well:

- 'Which Blob would you prefer to be, if different from your first choice?'

That can lead on to:

- 'What are the key differences between the two?'
- 'What needs to happen to enable you to move from your first Blob to your second?'

The free Blob Guide which you can order from the website when you buy particular pictures or a licence, gives all kinds of other ideas, including for use with children.

So how might we use this tool in our churches?

Uses in a church setting

Here are some examples of how this idea could be used in church life.

- At the end of any DIY training event, to see how people feel about their involvement in the specific service they are being trained in.
- During discussion of a major issue at a church council or committee meeting to get a sense of the mood of the meeting.
- In children's or youth groups with a wide range of possible applications.
- With a seniors' group to discover people's feelings about any specific issue in church life.
- In one-to-one, professional counselling.
- In a whole congregation to find out reactions to a new idea, a major financial project, or issues of public worship.



The left-hand half of the Beach Blob Picture

How can I get hold of the pictures?

If you want to use these Pip Wilson / Ian Long pictures widely you will need to buy a licence which will depend on the number of people leading sessions with the tool. See their website at <https://www.blobtree.com>. If you simply want to use one or two of the pictures, which you can check out from the catalogue on the website, you can buy downloads for £5.00 each.

Note that Pip Wilson died in 2023. It was said at his funeral, 'He was a professor of the soul and never forgot that although he became a Christian when he was 21, it was not until he was 40 years old that he discovered his feelings.' Having started in work with youth he went on to specialise in emotional intelligence in a range of settings.

A final warning

There is a danger in believing that your interpretation of the characters is the right one and expecting everyone else to see them as you see them. But different people will interpret them in very different ways and that should be encouraged not resisted.

So in the picture of the swimming pool, what does the Blob that is walking away from the pool actually 'mean'? Someone might see it as being afraid of the water, another as a loner who finds it hard to form relationships, yet another as someone who is having a bad day. They are

all 'correct' because, as already highlighted, the character you pick is not the point – it is only a hook for you to face something you feel.

Again, one person may interpret the swimming pool as one thing in people's lives and someone else may have a very different interpretation. What does the water represent? There is no one right answer.

The whole point of the picture is that people connect with the characters because they are easily recognisable, and that allows us all to express something of our emotions. I commend this simple tool for church use.

Sincere thanks to Ian Long for checking these notes and giving permission to show parts of three of his cartoons.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN155. See also Training Notes TN49, *What's going on under the water*, TN94, *Becoming self-aware*, and TN119, *Group behaviours to beware of*.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN155 under Management.

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