

Information for parents

Visual supports for people with developmental disorders, with specific reference to Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Visual supports are anything that we see that help us to understand what is happening around us. Visual supports provide a means of communication for children who have difficulty processing verbal information. They help children to cope with everyday functioning at home, pre-school, school and the wider community. Visual strategies enhance communication, augment language, facilitate learning, support behaviour, aid memory and promote independence.

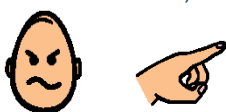
Why use visual strategies?

- Many children with developmental disorders have visual skills relatively superior to their other information processing skills. For example, they are better visually than they are as listeners. This is particularly the case for people with Autism Spectrum Disorder.
- Visual supports are non-transient, so they allow more time to process information. Spoken words are transient and may need to be repeated many times before meaning is established and understood. It is well known that people with Autism Spectrum Disorder experience significant difficulties processing information quickly and accurately, particularly verbal information. It is also known that people with Autism Spectrum Disorder process visual information far more effectively.
- Many children with developmental disorders who have severe language comprehension difficulties have been shown to rely heavily on visual supports to help them to understand what other people are saying and doing.
- Visual supports are effective in augmenting communication without hindering the development of natural speech and even perhaps enhancing it.
- Visual supports help to clarify communication and help children understand what is expected of them.
- Visual supports provide structure to the day.
- Visual supports are useful when teaching new skills.
- Visual supports assist children to cope with change and transition from activity to activity, and from place to place.
- Visual supports help children organise their thoughts.
- Visual supports reduce frustration by providing children with a means of communicating simple wants and needs.

Types of visual supports

Visual supports may include:

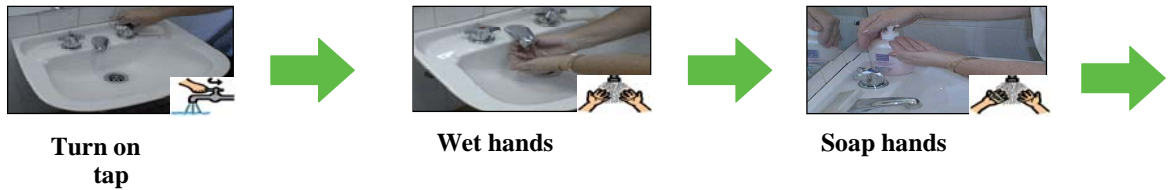
- Non-verbal communication such as body language (including facial expression, natural gestures, and tone of voice)
- Natural cues from the environment (including street signs, black clouds that indicate thunderstorms, flashing lights that indicate accident ahead).



- Materials that provide information (including timetables, calendars, shopping lists, menus and signs).



- Specially designed materials to provide information to meet an individual's specific needs (including choice boards, transition guides, photographic sequences, individualised calendars and timetables, shopping lists and menus).



Hierarchy of visual supports

When introducing visual supports to your child, it is important to consider what type of visual cue your child will best understand. There is a hierarchy of visual supports, progressing from concrete materials through to more abstract content.

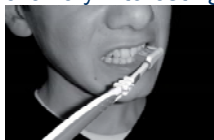
1. Real objects are the most concrete form of visual supports. A real object, for example a toy or a packet of chips, represents itself.



2. 'Remnants', for example an empty chip packet to represent chips, are more abstract but still very realistic.



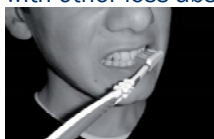
3. Photographs are more abstract, but represent specific people, objects, places and activities. They are very interesting and motivating.



4. Line drawings are usually made with computer programs such as Boardmaker or PCS. They are more abstract, but can be used to represent more generalised concepts, places and activities.



5. The printed word, eg "TOILET". Words are extremely abstract. They are often used in conjunction with other less abstract visual systems such as photos or line drawings.



Brush Teeth



6. Signing. Signing systems are extremely abstract and not recommended for people with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Another drawback is that signing is not a 'portable' system-very few people in the community know how to sign.














IMPORTANT: It is important to assess which type of visual system will suit a person with Autism Spectrum Disorder before setting out to make visual aids and programs. A useful rule of thumb is to always start with a system that is more 'real' and less 'abstract' at first. Some people make the mistake of beginning with systems that are too abstract and complicated. It is best to begin with simple, colourful, practical and motivating visual resources so that the person with Autism Spectrum Disorder will experience early success with these materials.

Colour photographs are a common starting point as they are motivating, familiar and specific to a person's circumstances and needs. If the person with Autism Spectrum Disorder clearly does not understand photos, return to real objects.

Some uses for visual supports

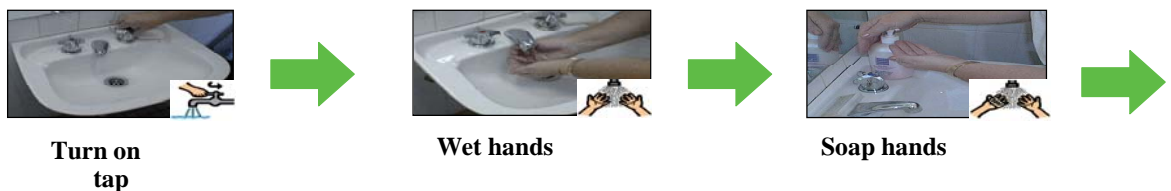
1. Timetables

- Timetables can be used to explain school terms, weeks, or days.
- Timetables give people direction and provide structure.
- Timetables can be used to warn people of changes to their routine, eg, put a cross on 'school' if the child is sick and place a symbol of 'home' underneath to explain, "No school today, stay at home".
- Timetables can help people prepare for the upcoming day as they are shown what is going to occur.
- Timetables assist people to learn the concept of time.

Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
preschool 	Speech 	preschool 	preschool 	park 	home 	grandma's 
television 	McDonald's 	television 	television 	shopping 	swim class 	

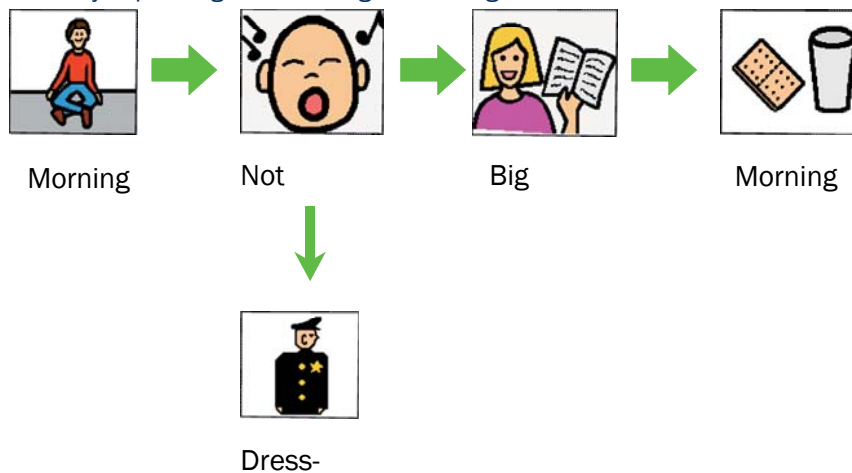
2. Routines at home and school

- Photos can be used in sequence to explain routine events. For example, morning and afternoon tea, lunch, washing hands, going to toilet, doing work, packing or unpacking bags, lining up, etc. photo sequences usually combine photos and the printed word. Sometimes it is possible to also include line drawings.



3. Transitions

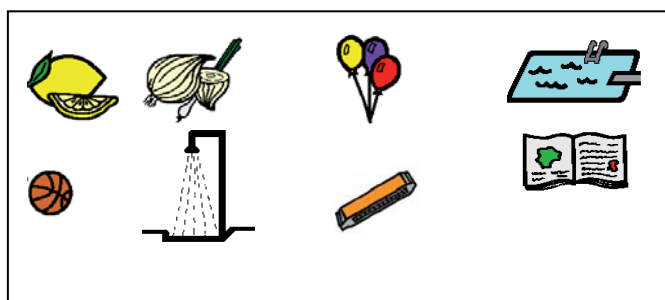
- Visual supports can be used to inform a child of change, and to show them what event is to follow.
- Visual supports are particularly useful for helping children learn new routines, eg changing rooms at secondary school.
- Visual supports are particularly useful for dealing with 'finishing'. For example, a child may have difficulty changing from obsessive play to another activity. Visual supports can prepare the way for this transition by explaining that a change is coming.



4. Choiceboards

- Choiceboards allow children to indicate their needs and wants.
- Choiceboards promote an exchange and interaction between the child and others.
- Choiceboards give children a means of communicating.

Julie Likes ✓



5. Supported play

- Supported Play sequences break play tasks down into single steps which can be explained, role-played and rehearsed. Play sequences inform children of what they are expected to do. They show children the sequences of play, and the expected outcome, for example "Mr Potato Head":



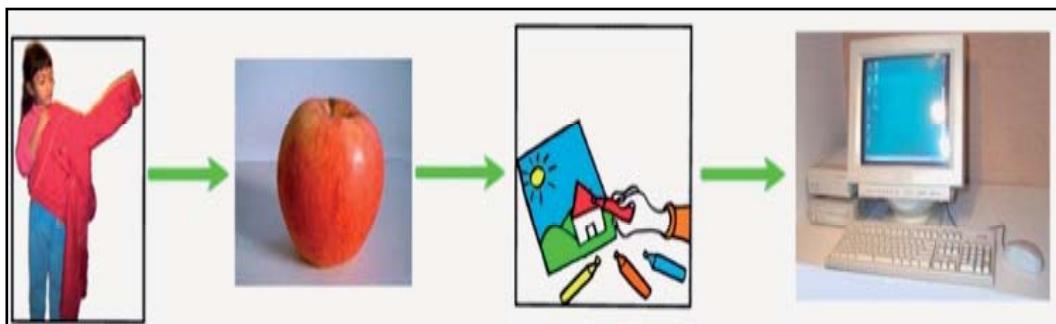
6. 'Finished' Box

- The 'Finished' Box helps children to understand and accept that an activity/event is finished.
- Finished boxes are easily made. Just use a tissue box or shoebox and make sure there is a slit in the top.
- Write 'finished' on the box or add a black and white chequered flag to represent 'finish'.
- Prompt children to put the toy/photo/symbol in the box and say "pack away, finished".



7. Play sequences

- Play sequences assist children to learn that they can play with favourite activities as part of a sequence of activities. This is particularly useful when trying to expand a child's repertoire of play skills from one highly focused interest, and to teach transitions.



8. Travel book

- Travel books keep a child informed about outings and travel.
- They give children prior warning about where they will be going and what they will be doing.
- Travel books can also be used in cars, buses and trains as a means of supporting calm and appropriate behaviour during a long and sometimes stressful trip.

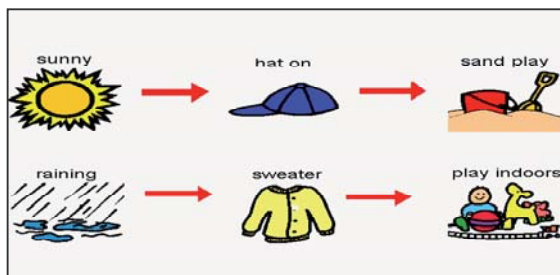
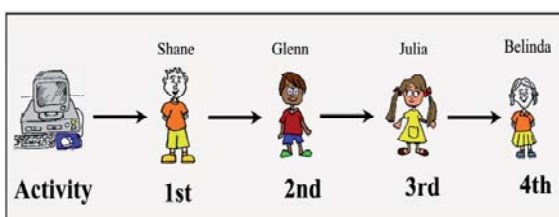


- Travel books can also be in the form of photo sequences attached to the back of the seat in front of the child.



9. Behaviour supports

- Positive behaviour supports assist children understand what is expected of them.
- They help to explain rules.
- They can assist in avoiding danger and reinforcing safety, eg "No! Don't touch, STOP!"
- Positive behaviour supports can target specific behaviours for individual children.
- They can be used to give alternatives to release frustration in a more appropriate manner.
- Positive behaviour supports can be used to explain steps in a routine.



10. Home/school diaries

- Home/school diaries encourage children to recall information.
- They encourage language.
- They assist children to transfer social information between different settings.
- They assist children to share experiences with teachers and parents.

Making visual supports

Here is a list of some materials you will need to make typical visual supports:

- Real objects, including toys, foods, clothing etc.
- Remnants of favourite food packets.
- Photos of favourite activities to use in play sessions or as rewards.
- Cardboard to act as a background for templates.
- Felt as an alternative to cardboard.
- 'Contact' to cover cardboard or photos in order to protect visuals and help them last longer. Alternatively visuals can be laminated.
- Adhesive Velcro can be used to attach photos, remnants or symbols to anything. Using Velcro allows you to change photos and remnants as needed. Blu-tac can also be used.
- Scissors-to cut materials to the appropriate shape and size.
- Glue and sticky tape-to permanently attach photos or symbols
- Rulers, felt pens etc
- Cardboard boxes to make 'Finished' box.

Visual materials should never be thrown away. It may well be that a person with Autism Spectrum Disorder may no longer need to use a particular visual program because they have 'internalised' the rules and sequences of behaviour. But sometimes things go wrong and people with Autism Spectrum Disorder forget what to do. At these times, particularly in times of stress or anxiety, it is always useful to return to the visual system that used to work.

Some people worry that their child, adolescent or adult may become dependent upon their visual aides. Visual aids can be likened to crutches for someone who cannot walk properly. It is not a case of becoming dependent upon these. It is a case of using them to gain and maintain independence. When the 'crutches' are no longer needed, the person will stop using them.

For more Information

If you require further information please contact:

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