

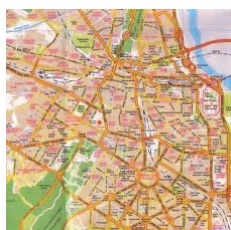
Tip Sheet

Providing Visual Supports

Children with autism often have difficulty with communication. This means they may have difficulty with getting messages across from one person to another. This may include difficulties with verbal language, tone of voice, gesture, facial expression and body language. Children with autism also frequently have difficulty understanding verbal language. Furthermore, children with autism may struggle to sequence information, retain and retrieve information and solve problems, all of which are involved in communication exchanges.

One of the positive strengths of children with autism is that they are usually able to understand what they SEE better than what they HEAR. Therefore, it is beneficial to provide information to the child visually, rather than relying on verbal input alone. The term 'visual supports' refers to anything that allows information to be presented to the child in visual form. This supports understanding of language. It also serves as a reminder of what was said, rather than relying on memory alone. Furthermore, visual supports can also act as a useful prompt to the child with autism to communicate their message to us.

Everybody uses visual supports. Examples of visual supports that most of us use every day include shopping lists, traffic signs, reminder notes and appointment cards.



Why are Visual Supports helpful for children with Autism?

- Visual supports allow the child with autism to **see what you mean** rather than relying on their ability to understand what they hear, which can often be difficult.
- Some visual supports e.g. a calendar or timetable, can **allow the child with autism to understand the sequence of events** that takes place over the day or week and to predict what will happen next. This can help to reduce anxiety.
- Visual supports **give the child more time to process incoming messages**.
- Visual supports help to make the child with autism more **independent** as they are less likely to have to rely on verbal prompts.
- Visual supports can help to **motivate** the child with autism as they build on the child's strengths.

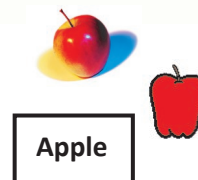
Another key benefit of visual supports is that they can **provide the child with autism with a means of getting their message across**. This may include visual communication systems, choice boards, cue cards and many more. The child can then learn to use the visual supports to communicate, as well as develop their verbal language. One of the most common causes of challenging behaviour is the frustration experienced by children with autism when they are not able to communicate what they need or want. By providing them with appropriate visual supports, we can make it possible for them to communicate their message more successfully.

What kind of supports should I use?

There is a hierarchy amongst visual supports, which begins with those that are easiest to understand and moves on to those that are most complex.

The representational hierarchy is as follows:

- Objects/part objects e.g. a real apple or toy apple
- Photographs of actual objects to be used e.g. photo of the specific type of apple to be eaten
- Photos of generic object e.g. a photo of any apple
- Pictures such as line drawings or picture symbols
- Written words



It is important to provide visual supports at the level that the child with autism can understand. For example, if the child does not yet recognise that words or pictures can represent real objects or events, then showing them a picture may not convey our message successfully. In this case, actual objects may be more suitable. Similarly, for older children who can read well, written words are a form of visual support that can provide effective assistance.

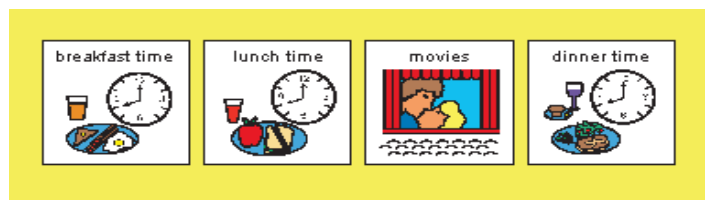
Children with Autism need to be taught how to use Visual Supports

Though children with autism tend to be visual learners, this does not mean that they will automatically understand what visual supports mean and how to use them. Instead, the child will have to be taught to use the visual support through association, modelling, guidance, practice, role play and regular use.

What are some Visual Supports that I can use?

Timetables, schedules and calendars

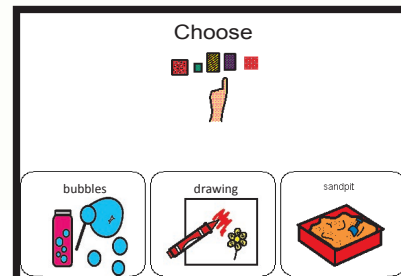
Children with autism often have difficulty sequencing information and prefer information to be predictable to help them understand what is happening. By visually showing what will happen throughout the week, the day, or part of a day, we can reduce potential anxiety in the child with autism and help them to function more independently. The major transitions of the day can be represented on a daily or weekly Schedule e.g. mealtimes, work/school times, specific and regularly occurring activities, special events such as visitors or outings. This type of schedule is usually displayed in an area where the child with autism can easily access it e.g. a common area or in a diary so that it can travel with the child.



When developing a calendar of events using concrete objects, it is important to remember the information you are trying to provide the person e.g. how many days until the anticipated event. Often, a person who has a concrete object level of understanding does not need more than a few days represented on their calendar at a time.

Choice boards

Visual supports can also be used to help the individual with autism to make choices. Place some motivating options on the choice board to increase the child's engagement and communication. This will also provide the child with a sense of control over their day.

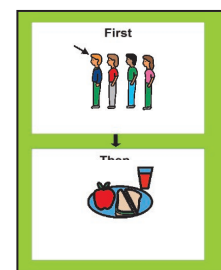


Activity-specific schedules

In activity-specific schedules, each step of a specific task is presented in the order in which it must be completed. This type of schedule is usually displayed in the area the event takes place. Just as we may find it helpful to use lists to keep track of what we should do, children with autism often find these kinds of supports extremely useful.

First-then boards

A first-then board is a visual way of showing a child what activity is happening first and what will follow the activity. The 'first' activity is usually an adult-directed task and the 'then' activity is usually a highly motivating activity for the child. This is a useful way to show the child the task expectations and the tangible reinforcer that will follow the first task.



Templates

Sometimes we can help a child with autism to function more independently by providing a template which shows them what to do. For example, we might enable the child to set the table for dinner by drawing the outlines of a knife, fork, plate and cup on placemats to identify where each piece goes on the table.

Communication supports

Visual supports such as cue cards can be used to support the child's understanding of a situation and also may prompt the child to use the card expressively. More detailed visual communication systems can be used, including the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), Aided Language Stimulation (ALS) mats, low tech communication books and more high tech communication devices. These are usually implemented under the guidance of a speech pathologist.



Remember

Visual supports do not have to be perfectly produced. Coloured cards with photos or drawings will last longer if they are laminated, but post-it notes with scribbled drawings or hastily written words can often be just as useful. The most important goal is to capture the needs of the child with autism in visual form, so that they can understand their environment and express their needs.

Children with autism will benefit from schedules and other visual supports remaining accessible as they develop. Visual supports may be adjusted over time to accommodate changing needs e.g. pictures might be replaced with words. In addition, supports may become more subtle as the child acquires skills and develops routines.