Visual Supports for Children with ASD

A Parent and Caregiver Resource
Parent Home Training Program
Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities Division

What are Visual Supports?

A visual support is a strategy for communicating with your child using pictures and drawings instead of using words. Visual supports take information that you might think to convey with language (e.g., asking your child "Do you want juice or milk?") and instead present the information visually (e.g., holding up a choice board that has a photograph of orange juice and a photograph of milk for your child to choose from.) Visual supports convey a lot of information in a manner that is easy for children with language delays to understand. However, they are not just helpful for children with language delays. We all use similar kinds of visual supports in our day-to-day lives because sometimes a visual representation of information is the best way for us to process information. We rely upon street signs to tell us where to go, calendars to keep track of appointments, lists at the grocery store, and online videos when we need to fix something around the house. Each of these strategies is a kind of a visual support.

Why Are Visual Supports Important?

There are two main reasons why visual supports can be so helpful for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). First, most children with ASD are visual learners, meaning that they learn best by looking and watching. This is true of the vast majority of children with ASD, even those who seem to understand and use auditory information well. It is very common for a child with ASD to be very good at puzzles, like to make patterns, or prefer to watch videos over and over. Part of the reason many children enjoy these activities is because they are using their visual strengths. Using visual information to communicate with your child is taking advantage of how children with ASD naturally prefer to communicate and can reduce their frustration. The second reason why visual supports are so effective is that processing language quickly is hard to do for some children with ASD. When you say a word or a sentence to a child, the words are available only for the brief moment they hang in the air. For children with difficulty processing language, that moment may not be enough time to make sense of the message or hold on to the message in order to use it. However, when you present information visually it can be there for as long as the child needs it. This means that holding up a visual STOP or NO sign when you are cooking on the stove can be more effective than saying "STOP!" or "No!", which you may have to say over and over.

Will Relying on Visual Supports Prevent My Child From Later Using Language?

No! We know using visual supports regularly does not interfere with a child's ability to later use or understand language. In fact, research consistently suggests the opposite is true. Many children with ASD begin to use more language soon after their parents or teachers start to use visual supports. This is because most parents and teachers naturally pair the visual support with language. Some children will then pick up the words faster because they are hearing them paired alongside visuals they easily understand.

A Note on Visual Supports & Augmentative and Alternative Communication

An Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) system is a special type of visual support. An AAC system is a specific way for your child to communicate their wants, needs, and thoughts **_to you_** without using speech. Children with ASD who are having trouble learning to use speech to communicate often use AAC strategies. Families of young children with ASD sometimes receive a recommendation to speak with a speech/language pathologist about AAC methods. There are numerous AAC strategies that children can learn to use such as sign language, pointing to or giving pictures, or an electronic device that produces speech. Selecting the right AAC method is an important and difficult task. You should speak with a speech/language pathologist (SLP) if you are considering using AAC. The visual supports discussed in greater depth in this resource tend to focus on strategies for **_you to communicate information to your child about something rather than for your child to communicate with you._** SLPs are also great at helping out with troubleshooting the various types of visual supports that we discuss in this resource.

Other Types of Visual Supports for Young Children

1. Transition Objects are real or toy objects to show it is time to transition (e.g., a spoon for meals, a blanket for nap time, or backpack for 'time for school')
2. Choice Boards display available options
3. Visual Schedules show the steps of an activity or the activities of the day
4. "No" (or Not Available, STOP) Signs to display unavailable items or unsafe places
5. Visual Countdown Timers show how long something is going to last
6. Visual Positive Reinforcement Systems display what needs to be done to earn a reward
7. Visual Labels show where things should be (e.g., picture of trains on train storage box or picture of child on chair)
8. Visual Boundaries show where things should take place (e.g., brightly colored rug in living room to show where to play)
9. Work Systems that use matching skills to show how to do something
10. Finished or All Done containers to show when an activity is over
11. Pictures to show a child how to behave (e.g., social narrative card that depicts the steps to ask a child to play)

Choice Boards

Choice Boards are a great way to introduce visual supports to a child with ASD. A Choice Board is a visual representation of the choices that are available at a given time. You can use a Choice Board to display options for a snack, options for a play activity, or toys that are available to play with. Initially, while children are learning to make a choice, we suggest that a Choice Board only offer two or three choices. Once your child has learned to make a choice, then you can begin to offer more and more choices. Also, it is recommended that the first choices offered be for things that your child really likes. Over time, you can begin to use Choice Boards for harder choices such as picking out their clothes or choosing the color of a marker for a craft activity.

Visual Schedules

Visual Schedules are picture representations of what is going to happen next. They help children understand and anticipate the future and they can teach children how to complete a task that has many steps. Many children do best when they first learn to use the simplest form of a visual schedule: the FIRST—THEN Board. The FIRST—THEN Board displays only the next two things that are going to happen (e.g., FIRST put on shoes, THEN go outside). Other children may be ready for a more complex schedule that shows several things that are going to happen such as the schedule for the day (e.g., eat breakfast, get dressed, put on shoes, go to school, . . .) or the steps to an activity like getting dressed (e.g., put on underwear, put on pants, put on shirt, put on socks, . . .). You can use a visual schedule to tell children about an unusual event that is going to happen in their day so that they are not surprised when it happens. If you normally go to the park every day after preschool, but today you are going to the doctor's office, you can use a visual schedule to show your child about the change and prepare them for it.
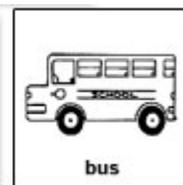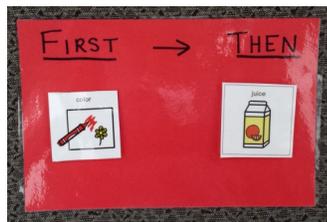
Countdown Timers

It is challenging for young children to understand is how long activities or events are going to last. A Countdown Timer is a visual representation of time that can be used instead of saying "five more minutes until the TV gets turned off". It can tell your child how long they have to wait for their turn with their favorite toy or how long until they are going to have to give up their turn with their favorite toy. Using a Countdown Timer can prevent frustration caused by not knowing exactly when something exciting is going to happen or being surprised when they have to give up a preferred activity. A basic Countdown Timer has a series of tokens that you remove one by one until they are all gone and it is time for a change. Each time you remove a token, show your child that the number of tokens is getting smaller. After a child sees the timer used a few times, they will begin to understand what removal of the tokens means.

Visual Positive Reinforcement System

A Visual Positive Reinforcement System displays what needs to be done before a child can earn positive reinforcement. Positive reinforcement is a strategy used to increase certain behaviors by giving access to preferred activities, toys, or foods after completing that desired behavior. If you are working on your child's ability to share toys with their sibling, you can use a Visual Positive Reinforcement System to help with motivation. You begin by having your child select a reward using a Choice Board or some other method that captures what they want. Then, show your child using the system that they have to earn 3 or more tokens and then they will receive their reward. The Visual Positive Reinforcement System is a visual reminder of what they are working for and also displays how many times they need to do something such as share with their sibling before they get access to their reward.
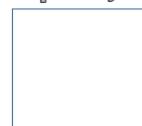
Tips for Success

1. **<u>Simple and low tech is usually best.</u>** There are a number of complex visual support systems available for purchase online, but we have found that the ones that you can make at home work just as well. The visual schedule that you draw on a piece of construction paper can be just as effective as the fancy one designed by complex program for a tablet because the only thing that really matters is creating a clear visual message for your child. Plus, when you make your own visual support, it can be easily personalized for the needs of your child.

2. **<u>Remember that teaching will be needed.</u>** Like any new concept, using a visual support is something that you will need to teach your child. Most of the time, you will need to show your child the visual support and guide them through the steps of using it many times. Only then, will a child begin to understand what is going to happen when you show it to them. If your child is not familiar with using a Choice Board, you may need to initially physically prompt your child to point to an option. Then, you give them the choice that they pointed to. You may need to practice this several times before they will begin to make a choice on their own. Try not to get frustrated if the visual strategy does not work on the first try or if your child seems frustrated during the first few times you walk them through the visual. This is common and should reduce over time. If you have been trying for some time and the strategy is not working, talk to your PHT consultant or a speech/language pathologist familiar with your child.

3. **<u>Be consistent.</u>** Use the visual support in the same way each time, especially when you are first demonstrating what the visual support means. That way, your child knows that the visual carries the same message each time you present it.

4. **<u>Pair with language but keep your language short and sweet.</u>** Using visual supports can have the bonus for your child of learning new words faster because you pair your language with an easily understood visual image. For this to be most effective, use the smallest number of words necessary to describe what the visual support depicts. For example, instead of saying "FIRST, we are going to take a bath upstairs and THEN we are going to get the bubbles out" you may wish to just say "FIRST bath, THEN bubbles".

Some Useful Resources on Visual Supports

Visual strategies for improving communication: Practical supports for school and home
by Linda Hodgdon
Autism Internet Modules: Visual Supports
www.autisminternetmodules.org
More Than Words by Fern Sussman
Do2Learn Website www.do2learn.com

For more information about this resource or to inquire about the Parent Home Training Program call (505) 272-1852 or 1-800-270-1861.