



## ***Using Visual Supports to Help Your Child Understand and Communicate***

Communication is a common problem for children who have autism and related disabilities. These children often have difficulty understanding verbal or “spoken” communication from others. Because of this they have problems knowing what is or is not happening during their day and why changes occur in their routine. They may have difficulty switching from one activity to the next and understanding why they cannot do something they want to do at a particular time. For a child with disabilities even simple directions can come and go too quickly for them to process and understand. A visual support can really help them understand the message.

Visual supports can help children who do not have conventional communication systems to become more able communication partners. The use of pictures to support communication with persons who have impairments has been common for some time. Years ago, Robinson-Wilson (1977) demonstrated that sequenced pictures could help persons with disabilities to follow picture recipes based on previously published cookbooks.

Many children with disabilities have strong visual skills, and these strengths can be capitalized on with visual supports. Visual communication tools such as objects, photographs, picture symbols, daily schedules and choice boards can provide the support necessary to greatly improve a child's understanding and ability to communicate, helping children be more active, independent and successful participants in their lives.

### ***Daily Schedules***

A daily schedule shows the major events of a child's day. It is best to just include the major portions of the day. Otherwise the schedule might get too long and difficult for a child to follow successfully. This type of clear, simple support provided ahead of time can help a child predict what is going to happen in the future. It also helps them understand when there is a change in the routine so they can adapt and become more flexible.



It is important to use the schedule consistently, making it part of the child's daily routine. The schedule should be used to preview what is going to happen throughout your child's day and referred back to during each transition. If your child wanders away from an activity, you can also use the schedule to guide the child back.

When you first begin using the schedule, you will probably need to perform the steps yourself. This is called modeling. It allows your child to learn how to use the schedule by first watching you. However, as soon as possible your child needs to actively participate in the process. For example, at first you may need to put the

schedule together yourself but soon your child might take part by placing each picture on the board as you hand it to him/her.

### **Task Checklists and Mini-Schedules**



Task checklists or mini-schedules are useful in targeting certain events or tasks in the daily schedule where a child has difficulty. They are used to break a larger task down into smaller steps which are easier for a child to handle. Another reason for using the task checklist or mini-schedule is to build independence within typical routines. Mini-schedules could be used for routines such as going to the bathroom, getting ready for school, and getting ready for bedtime.

### **Calendars**

A calendar is a good way to help your child understand what is happening on a larger scale than a daily schedule. A calendar can tell a child which days are school days and which days are not. It can also inform a child when an unusual event will take place such as going to the doctor on Thursday or to the mall on Saturday.

Unusual events which interrupt the regular routine can confuse children, resulting in behavior problems. Calendars allow you to present these changes in a clear, simple way well in advance using a picture symbol. Because the information is there on the calendar, the child can refer back to it as often as needed. Whenever there are going to be changes it can also be helpful to have your child physically take part in changing the calendar. For example, if your child usually has swimming lessons on Thursdays but this Thursday she has a doctor's appointment, she can be the person who removes the swimming picture from the calendar and replaces it with the doctor. A calendar can also be used to show when someone is coming to stay for a visit, when the family will be taking a trip, when your child might be staying at another house and when the babysitter is coming.

### **Choice Boards and Menus**

A choice board or menu is one of the simplest forms of visual communication supports to begin using. They can come in all sorts of sizes and formats, depending on the kind and number of choices. For example, you could keep a choice board right on your refrigerator door for snack time. It can tell your child the various food or drink choices available to him. This helps your child learn how to communicate by requests using picture symbols and is a good way to provide



immediate reinforcement. Examples of choice boards commonly used (start with one category at a time) include foods and drinks, toy choices, activity choices (chase, computer, swim), places (restaurants, library, stores, park, beach), clothing and shoes, people, songs, etc. When first introducing choices, start with 2 or 3 choices, then, gradually over time and as communication progresses, increase the number of choices offered at one time.

### ***Creating the Visual Support***

*1. Decide what the visual support needs to do.* You may wish to target things like providing your child with choices, providing information about upcoming activities or people's whereabouts, helping your child with transitions, or helping him/her complete a task involving lots of steps.

*2. Determine how things will be visually represented.* Does your child understand written words and picture symbols, or are photographs necessary. Remember that you don't want your child to have to struggle to understand what the individual pictures mean. You don't put your appointments on your calendar in another language, so do not use visual supports that are difficult for your child to interpret. Abstract images can be hard for some children to understand so you may need to use a photograph instead of a picture symbol. Using colored and/or larger sized pictures can also help your child understand more easily. Also remember to put the exact word on a symbol that you use with your child. If you ask your child if he needs to go "potty", don't put "toilet" to label the picture (use potty).

*3. Make the picture symbols and/or take photographs to be used.* Make sure the picture clearly focuses on one thing. Don't take a picture of the whole living room if the object you need is the television. If the object you want is the television, take a picture of just the television.

*4. Make the visual support as durable as possible.* Laminating picture symbols with clear contact paper is a great way to preserve the visual support.

*5. Decide where the visual support will be kept.* Think about what the logical location is for the support. For example, you may want to put food choices on the refrigerator. Pick a good central location in the house for the schedule, maybe on a wall in the kitchen or living room. If your child moves around a lot, you may want to create a portable schedule out of a photo album or three ring notebook that he/she can take with him/her.

### ***How to Make a Visual Schedule***

1. Gather Materials such as scissors, glue stick, poster board, clear contact paper, Velcro, pictures (photographs, pictures from magazines, computer programs, food labels, etc.).

2. Choose pictures for the schedule you wish to create. Keep in mind that a visual schedule helps children anticipate transitions and activities. It may outline parts of a day, half-day or an entire day.

3. Cut your pictures. Mount (glue) on same size poster board or manila folder for durability. Keep in mind the child's developmental level.
4. Laminate or cover the pictures with clear contact paper.
5. Put a small piece of Velcro on the back center of each picture. Use the same type of Velcro for the back of the pictures and the opposite type for the schedule board.
6. Create a strip/board to hold the pictures using poster board. Make it long enough to hold pictures for several activities. Laminate and put a Velcro strip across or down the center. Put Velcro on the backs of the pictures to attach to the strip on the schedule. If needed add a pocket at the end that represents "finished" or "all done." Otherwise pictures can be turned over to indicate "all done." The schedule may be vertical or horizontal.
7. Velcro the pictures to the schedule in the order activities occur. Depending on the child, use only a few pictures at a time (e.g., part of a day) OR individually present the pictures to the child by pulling them off of the schedule to show them.
8. Show the schedule to the child. Remove pictures with the child at the end of each activity and place in pocket or turn them over.

### ***Additional Resources***

The following sites contain free picture symbols or visual supports that you can download:

- <http://www.usevisualstrategies.com/AutismVisualPrintablePictures.aspx>
- <http://www.do2learn.com/>
- <http://www.grocerypecs.com/index.html>
- <http://www.autismteachingtools.com>
- [http://www.setbc.org/setbc/communication/aac\\_nontech\\_toolkit.html](http://www.setbc.org/setbc/communication/aac_nontech_toolkit.html)
- <http://www.practicalautismresources.com/printables>

To purchase a copy of Picture It and other related software for creating visuals, go to:

- <http://www.cricksoft.com/us/default.asp>

You can purchase a copy of Boardmaker and other software for creating visual supports using picture symbols or download a free trial copy of Boardmaker software at:

- <http://www.mayer-johnson.com/products/boardmaker-software/>

Custom Boards Premium is an evidence based app for ipad designed to serve as a board creator for parents and professionals to use with children who need symbols to communicate and learn:

- <http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/custom-boards-premium/id463344117?mt=8>