Visual Supports for Students with Autism

Eastern Upper Peninsula Autism Grant Team
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What are visual supports?

Simply put, visual supports are a way of making auditory information visual.
Visual Supports are an effective instructional tool…

“Visual supports organize a sequence of events, enhancing the student’s ability to understand, anticipate and participate in those events.

Visual supports supplement verbal instruction, clarifying the information for the student and increasing comprehension.

Visual supports can be used to cue communication, providing reminders of what to do and say in a situation.”

Quill, 1995
Visual supports are a way to solve problems…

What do you hear yourself saying over and over?
What do you hear students asking over and over?
Where are student performances breaking down?

“If you’ve told a child a thousand times and he still does not understand, then it is not the child who is the slow learner.”
Attributed to Walter Barbee
Who needs visual supports?

We all do!

Think about the visual supports we use every day…
cookbooks, maps, day planners and calendars,
phone books, grocery lists, memos, notes and
reminders.

Students with autism and students who are visual learners need visual supports…but most of our students would benefit from them.
When do we use visual supports?

Throughout the day.
Visual supports need to be portable so they can go wherever the child goes.

Throughout our lives.
Once the student is successful we may be tempted to remove visual supports, but experience has shown us that as students enter new environments and face new challenges it is much easier to modify existing visual supports than to reintroduce supports which had been taken away.
Visual Supports come in many forms.

- **Written words**
- **Pictures**: photos, color pictures, black and white pictures, picture-symbols like those used in the Mayer Johnson Boardmaker program
- **Gestures**
- **Objects in the environment**: i.e. supplies that are needed for the next activity are sitting on the table or desk where that activity will occur:
- **Arrangement of the environment**: i.e., the chairs are set up in the reading circle
Why use visual supports?

Visual supports consider the preference and strength of individuals with autism to process non-transient and visual-spatial information.

When we present information verbally, the words are available for a brief moment.

When we present information visually it can be there for as long as the student needs it.
A few points to remember:

1. It is only by using the visuals that students will attach meaning to them.

2. Sometimes you will see immediate results. Sometimes it takes days, weeks or months before you see results. STICK WITH IT but be thinking about the possibility of making modifications. Sometimes one little change can make a big difference.

3. Some visual supports may be used less over time but it’s a good idea to keep them handy for those times when the student needs a little extra support because they aren’t feeling well, haven’t had enough sleep or are just having an “off day”. If the supports are kept in place they can be easily changed when the student transitions to a new, more challenging environment.
4. Make visual supports age appropriate. Consider the size and portability of the visual as well as the kind of visual symbols you use (i.e. objects, pictures, line drawings, words). Be sure they “fit the environment”.

5. Take all school settings into consideration. Don’t forget recess, lunch, inclusion, etc. You can make visual supports portable and easy to access by keeping them in an envelope that hangs by the door. Teach students to get the envelope they’ll need to take with them to activities around the school.

6. When using visual supports pair them with spoken language so students begin to attach meaning. But use the words sparingly and match key words and phrases to the objects, pictures or actions.
7. The higher the stress level the more need for visuals. Using spoken language usually serves to increase rather than decrease stress levels. Using pictures allows us to communicate effectively with the student without adding to their stress.

8. Independence is our goal! Visual supports promote independence by providing visual cues which can eventually be used by the student for self-prompting. Verbal cues alone can create dependence on other people.
In this presentation you will see examples of visual supports that we have used with our students.

You may be able to use some of the ideas just as they are. But more than likely you will want to develop visuals that are specific to the needs and challenges of the students you work with.

Start with one or two ideas. Give them time to work. We hope you will realize the endless possibilities.
1. Visual Schedules

The goal of a visual schedule is for the child to transition independently to the next activity.

Schedules need to be portable and easy to access and use. They should not be faded out as the student “learns” their schedule.

You can use pictures, words, colored-coded cards or whatever works best for the individual student. Use symbols at the child’s level of understanding.
Example #1
This schedule works well for younger students just learning to use a schedule or for students in a self-contained classroom.

1. A “check schedule” card is kept right next to the schedule. When it is time for the student to transition to the next activity the card is handed to the student with the request to “check your schedule”. The student will bring the card back to the place where it belongs, thus bringing him to his schedule.

2. Once the student is at their schedule they can be cued or physically assisted to take the next card on the schedule.

3. The picture in their hand tells them where they are going. A “receiver envelope” is kept at the site where the activity will occur. The student puts the picture in the envelope and then he is right there where the activity takes place—transition complete!

I first heard the terms “check schedule card” and “receiver envelope” at a workshop with Barbara Bloomfield from New York. She has a business called “Icon Talk Visual Teaching Materials”. You can request a catalog at autism@magiccarpet.com.
Example #2

This schedule works well for students who spend most of their day in general education.

This schedule is both portable and flexible. It is made from an inexpensive folder like any student would carry with them.

As each activity is completed the card is turned around in the mini-pocket (made from pieces of cardboard taped on the folder).

Students can put their assignments “to be done” in the left pocket and “completed” assignments in the right pocket.
Example #3

This schedule clearly communicates what needs to be done. It can be attached to a notebook or clipboard so it is portable and easy to use.

As each activity is completed the card is moved to the “All Done” column. Be sure to schedule activities the student enjoys, to keep them interested and motivated.
Don’t Forget Special Days and Activities

Don’t forget party days, field trips, and any other unusual days.

For those unexpected activities which can occur any day it is handy to have a “surprise” card (i.e., a solid pink card) which can be put on the schedule to signal a change.

You will find that a change in schedule is usually OK if the student is prepared.
2. Mini-Schedules

Mini-schedules break down an activity into manageable steps. They are a visual form of task analysis.

Examples of other routines which lend themselves well to a mini-schedule:
- washing dishes
- circle time activities
- assembly tasks
- cooking tasks
- bathroom routine

Here is an example of a mini-schedule for getting ready for a winter recess.

- snowpants on
- boots on
- jacket on
- hat and mittens on
- wait for teacher
- wait
3. I need a break!

**Identifying the need for a break** and **getting a break appropriately** are important skills for our students.

When a student with autism needs to be released from an activity he will make that need known, one way or another. If he does not have an appropriate and easy way to request out of the activity we may see inappropriate behavior serving as that communication.

Break cards are a nice way for students to request a break.
Once our students identify the need for a break they may need some cues for helping them decide what break activity will best meet their needs and enable them to return to their work upon completion of the break.
4. All Done

The same principle is true for students requesting out of an activity to which they will not return. When our students want or need out of an activity they are going to let us know! If stress levels are rising we might see a physical response or a strong verbal response which indicates “I’m done!” We can teach our students an appropriate and effective way to negotiate out of an activity. One of the ways we can do this is to make an “all done” card available to them. The “all done” card is kept within reach of the student to make it an easy response. You can teach the “all done” card by anticipating a student’s need to request out of the activity, and at the first sign of an inappropriate reaction you can shape their hand to reach for the card, say “all done” and give an unmistakable cue that they are free to go. One of the concerns we hear is that the break card or the all done card will be overused. This is not what we have observed. Our students moderate their use based on their needs. The ability to successfully escape an activity decreases stress, thus actually increasing tolerance.
5. Making a Contract

Consider this familiar scene…
The teacher wants student to complete assigned work.
The student wants to play a computer game.
Consider this solution…

First  | Then
---     | ---
work   | computer

This gives the student a visual reminder that once the non-preferred task is completed they will be able to do a preferred activity.
Once you use this “contract” you will find all kinds of opportunities to put it to the test! Here are a few ideas to help you start thinking about other ways you might use the first-then board:
6. Make it Concrete

Any concept that is abstract in nature is typically challenging to our students with special needs. We tend to use a lot of words when a few words paired with a picture or gesture would be more effective.

The next two slides will show examples of using pictures to communicate requests.
Waiting can be a very abstract concept: Where do I wait? How long do I wait? What do I do while I wait?

Pictures, visual timers and wait cards can help give meaning to the word “wait”.

We made “wait” cards for each of our students. When a student is asked to wait his turn, wait for a snack or activity, wait in line, etc. they are given a wait card and asked to “wait, please”. After the wait we say “thank you for waiting” and hold out our hand to receive the card.

This gives a beginning and an ending to the “wait” time and helps distinguish it from a “no” response. Keep wait cards handy wherever you would use them most.
One of my students was learning to pick up the toys he typically dropped wherever he wandered.

When I asked the student to “put it away” I got a less than favorable response to what I thought was a simple request. Later that day I printed a Boardmaker picture of a student cleaning up toys and attached it to a plastic cleaning bucket. I tried my request again…”put it away” and gestured for the student to put the toy in the bucket. This time I got a very favorable response. Later we worked on taking the toy out of the bucket and putting it on the shelf. While teaching this next step it was easy to have the bucket and toy right at the shelf where it would be put away, again making it a quick and easy task with no stress. Eventually the student was able to respond to a verbal request to “put it away” by picking up the toy and walking across the room to put it on the shelf. Sometimes we find that the use of visuals actually teaches auditory comprehension.
7. Reminders and rules

This is a good way to remind students to walk in the classroom or hallway. For some students, handing them this card before walking in the hall is enough to slow down the pace.
Carry cards like these when walking in the community to reinforce verbal requests to follow rules of safety.
8. Using Visual Cues to Support Language

Cards like these can be used to cue language when you are teaching key words and phrases. Present the card as you verbalize the words on the card. You will be able to fade your verbal cues as the student begins to read the card independently.

- I need help, please.
- Yes, please.
- No, thank you.
- You’re welcome.
9. Structuring Work Tasks

Spoken or unspoken, these are the questions our students want answered:

What do I have to do?
How much of it do I have to do?
How do I know when I’m done?

Visual supports can provide the answers.

With this visual cueing system, students move the picture of each task to the done envelope as it is completed. When all the pictures are in the done envelope the work session is ended.
10. Communicating “No”

Often the questions we hear students asking over and over are receiving a negative response. Rather than getting caught in the NO game we recommend using the universal NO symbol.

We have placed these on cabinets, closets, desks, etc. which are off limits to students. They can also be superimposed on pictures to communicate negation or unavailability.
11. Giving Students a Choice

Make choices available whenever you can!

BEING ABLE TO MAKE CHOICES, *EVEN THE SIMPLEST OF CHOICES*, IS EMPOWERING TO A CHILD AND CAN INCREASE POSITIVE BEHAVIOR.

Look for an opportunity to present choice in every teaching routine.

Make choices visual…with pictures, words or the objects themselves.
12. Cooking with Pictures

Adding visual supports to life skills activities like cooking greatly increases student involvement and independence. Using visual cues at their cognitive level allows students to gather ingredients, measure, follow steps and routines, etc. These supports can be in the form of pictures paired with simple written instructions.

This picture recipe is an example of a visual approach to cooking.
13. Shopping

Using a visual shopping list allows students to participate in the making of a list as well as the purchasing. When you run out of a student’s favorite snack, place a visual representation of the food (can be a picture or product symbol taken from the empty box or bag) on the shopping list to cue the student that it will be available soon. It also serves as a reminder to you.

You can also use the shopping list to purchase ingredients needed for a recipe.
During the 2001-2002 school year we started an effort to educate our families about visual supports. Using them just at school was like having a well-kept secret that benefited the students while they were at school but did little for them when they got on the bus to go home. We met with families, listened to them talk about the challenges they faced and then problem-solved with visual supports. On the following pages we will share some of the ideas that were developed as a result of these home visits. Please keep in mind that we did not go to the families with a list of ideas and suggested they try them…instead, we spent time listening and took our cues from the families.
1. Home School Calendar

Imagine getting up in the morning and not knowing if it’s a work day. You get dressed, eat breakfast and then if your carpool shows up you know you’re going to work. If they don’t show up you figure it must be the weekend.

For some of our students, every day is like that. They get up not knowing if there will be a school bus coming to pick them up or not. A calendar like the one on the following slide can give our students the information they need.
We use small pictures attached to a calendar with Velcro. The pictures are removed day by day, so the next picture showing is always “today”. Don’t forget pictures for snow days, sick days, company’s coming, going for a visit and other significant events.
2. Preparing for Visitors

In the home: We use a card like this one for families to prepare their child for our home visits. That way it isn’t a surprise when the teacher shows up at the door. For our students with ASD the teacher belongs at school. Now, this doesn’t always make it comfortable that we are in the home when we belong at school, but it isn’t a surprise when we show up at the door.

Place a picture of the person coming to visit here.
2) At school: Just like the teacher “belongs” at school, the “parents” belong at home. So, for some of our students Mom is out of place when she comes to visit school. Putting her picture on the daily home-school calendar is one way to let the student know that Mom is coming to visit school today. That might not make it OK that Mom’s at school, but what it does do is to let the student know when to expect or not expect Mom at school.

The point is...we are not keeping our students guessing. We are letting them know what to expect.
3. Where are we going?

This is the same idea as the field trip schedule we use at school. Whether the student is verbalizing the question over and over to Mom and Dad or is wondering silently, the pictures are there to answer the question “where are we going?”. 
4. First-Then Board at Home

The first-then board can be used at home as well as at school. One parent even asked us to make an if-then-then board for her child’s doctor visits. The first issue was the child refusing to get in the car. The second issue was not wanting to go to the doctor. The child was willing to complete the first two activities when he knew a trip to McDonald’s would be the third activity.
5. Mini-Schedules at Home

We had one family tell us their child was doing just fine with the morning routine, but upon further reflection she realized this was because she gave numerous verbal prompts every day. Putting the routine into pictures allows parents to fade the verbal prompts and promotes independent completion of the tasks.

- use bathroom
- get dressed
- eat breakfast
- brush teeth
- watch for bus
Choices at home are just as important as choices at school. Remember that even the simplest of choices can empower the child and increase positive behavior.

“Do you want to use the yellow toothbrush or the blue toothbrush?” was enough to get one family past “I don’t want to brush my teeth”.
Making snack choices visual and available can help the child communicate his wants and needs for something to eat or drink and allows you to control the options.

In the community:
Picture Sources/Velcro Sources

Picture sources for creating visual supports:

- Boardmaker computer program from Mayer Johnson (www.mayer-johnson.com)
- images.google.com
- Writing With Symbols computer program
- PixWriter computer program
- digital camera photos
- magazine and catalog pictures
- labels from food products, toy boxes, etc.

We found the most effective way to use the Velcro is to keep the soft loop (female) Velcro on the home surface and the rough hook (male) Velcro on the movable pictures. The important thing is to be consistent in how you apply the Velcro throughout your program so that all of your pictures can be used with any home surface.

Velcro sources:

- www.feinersupply.com
- www.fastenation.com (Dual Lock clear Velcro)
- www.textol.com
- www.hookandloop.com
Web-Sites

www.dotolearn.com
This site has many ready-made visuals which are easy to print and use.

www.usevisualstrategies.com
This site has pictures to download and lots of resources.

www.mayerjohnson.com
Check out this site to find out more about Boardmaker and other resources.

www.images.google.com
This site literally has thousands of pictures you can access.

www.tinsnips.org
This site has some simple picture recipes.
More Web-Sites

www.teacch.com
This site has tons of information on autism and related issues, including structured work tasks.

www.pecs.com
This site explains the Picture Exchange Communication System by Bondy and Frost.

www.playsteps.com
This site illustrates and sells visually structured play tasks.

www.tonyattwood.com and www.aspie.com
Check out these sites to find out more about Autism and Asperger Syndrome. Great links to other sites.

www.autism-mi.org
For more information on autism and resources related to autism.
Books

• Visual Strategies for Improving Communication by Linda Hodgdon

• Solving Behavior Problems in Autism by Linda Hodgdon

Both of these books are available from Quirk Roberts Publishing (P.O. Box 71 Troy, Michigan 48099-0071) or at www.usevisualstrategies.com.

We are interested in your feedback about this CD.

Was it helpful to you for:

• Learning about visual supports
• Sharing visual supports with educators, families, agencies

Please e-mail your comments or questions to

Cindy Butler at

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Thanks!

We look forward to hearing from you!
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