

Aspect Autism Advisor Program

Visual Communication Supports

Children on the autism spectrum may have difficulties with some or all aspects of communication. From thinking about what they want to say and initiating an interaction, to understanding what people are saying and how to use communication for a range of functions.

Visual communication supports, include pictures or other visual items that can be particularly helpful for communicating with a child who has difficulty with receptive (comprehension) or expressive language.

Visual communication supports come in a variety of forms such as photographs, drawings, objects, written words, or lists. Research has shown that visual supports work well as a way to communicate and/or to support communication.

Many people on the autism spectrum have visual strengths, which means they process information better when it is presented visually, rather than verbally. Visual supports are anything you can see and can help with:

- understanding (they are simplified)
- attention, information processing & memory; and
- support independence (reducing verbal prompts).

Encouraging communication

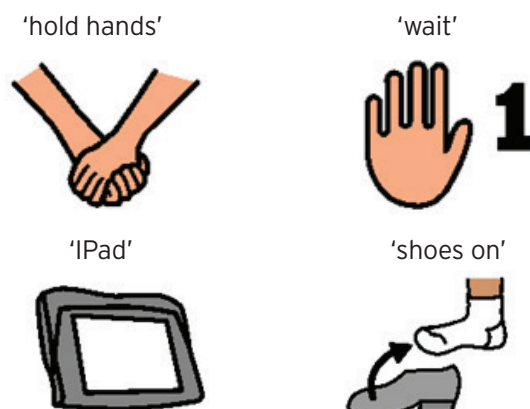
Children on the autism spectrum may find it difficult to understand and process spoken language. Typically, however, they have a strong understanding of visual information. Communicating using visual supports assists them to understand spoken language in a simple and logical way.

Visual supports can help a child:

- understand a routine
- understand "what's next"
- follow instructions
- follow the rules
- complete a task
- learn how to play or support the steps of play
- understand change
- gain independence
- learn new behaviours and skills.

Single Picture Format

One of the simplest forms of visual support is the use of a single picture. This can be used to show a child what you want them to do or what they are doing next, for example:

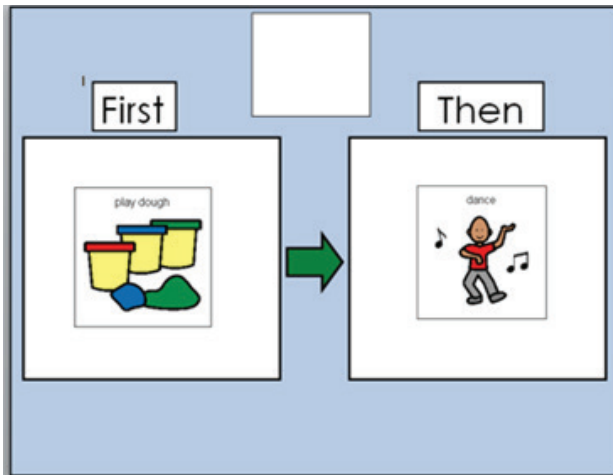


When using a single picture support, show the child the picture or photo that you want them to understand and say the name using simple language. Remember that they may need more than a quick glance to process the information, so try to hold the visual up for at least 5 seconds.

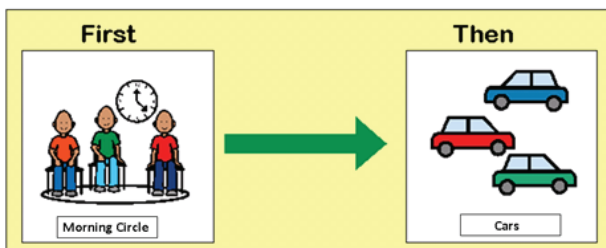
Visual supports can be useful even when you feel that the child should know what you are saying (such as a routine instruction like "shoes on"), as they can help avoid any confusion and reduces the chance of distraction or avoidance.

FIRST - THEN Board

This type of visual is useful in helping children understand a sequence or order of activities. It can also assist in motivating them to follow a request and encourage positive behaviours during activity transitions.



This format of visual supports can also provide a constructive way to say 'no' when a child is asking for something they can't have immediately. For example, if a child has requested TV but it is time for dinner, a visual that shows "first dinner - then TV" might help the child understand when they can watch TV.



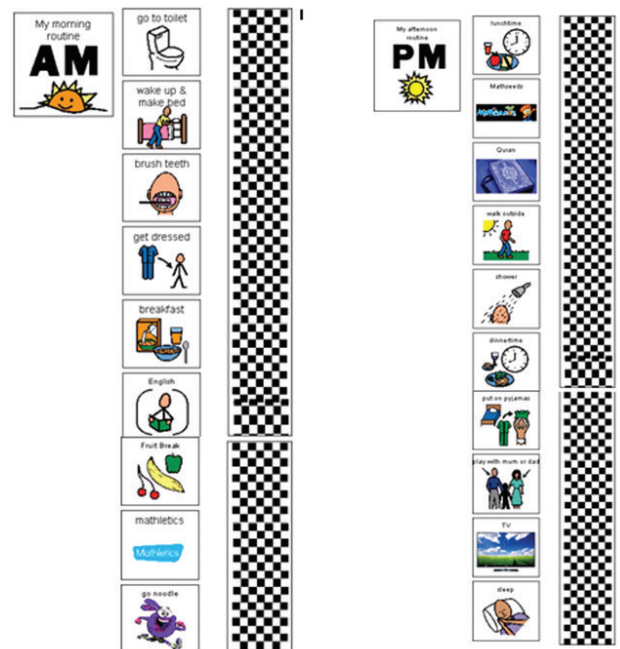
Visual supports to help complete a task or as part of a routine

Children on the autism spectrum can find it difficult to complete tasks that have a number of steps, such as; unpack bag or going to the toilet.

Visual supports break these tasks into smaller steps to help explain them and can reduce the amount of verbal prompting from adults and increase a child's independence in these tasks.



Similarly, a visual schedule can provide a visual representation of what is going to happen throughout the day. Children on the autism spectrum enjoy routine and consistency. These visuals can assist them to know what is about to happen and what is expected of them, and help children prepare for difficult transitions. They may also help to reduce anxiety around changes in routine by providing visual reminder.



Visuals for expressive communication:

When children experience challenges using speech as their main form of communication, using pictures and/or photos can help them get their message across.

When children are learning how to use pictures to communicate, we accompany this with verbal prompting from an adult to help model and imitate language. Pictures are handed to a partner, or pointed to on a board to reinforce the request made and ensure a successful communication attempt. As a child improves in their expressive language, they may start to use verbal language in conjunction with visuals.

Using visual supports to request

Children can use pictures or photos to request something they want. Children may be involved in learning a formal system like the "Picture Exchange Communication System" (PECS - <https://pecsaustralia.com>) or they may simply use pictures in a similar but less formal way.

To encourage the use of pictures for communication, try the following sequence of steps:

- Identify an opportunity for the child to make a request. This may be an event, such as choosing a song at singing time, or it may be a situation such as 'forgetting' to give the child a pencil at drawing time to encourage them to request 'pencil'.
- Offer the child access to the visuals (photos or pictures). *Note: When children are first learning to use pictures, you might show them only one picture of something you know they want and as they learn more pictures, you may increase the number to 2, 4 or more.*
- Initially provide hand on hand assistance to help model the child picking up the picture and handing it to the person they want to communicate with.
- Encourage the child to learn to put the picture in your hand so they learn that communication is about exchanging a message with another person. *Note: When children on the autism spectrum learn to point to a picture they often don't realise that they need to get someone's attention first to show them what they want. When handing a picture to a person is part of the process, children have learnt to communicate with someone else.*
- When the child puts a picture in your hand, say the name of the picture or thing they have requested, e.g. "drawing. Want drawing".
- When children are learning to use visual supports it is recommended that you give them what they have requested immediately.

Encourage children to request by:

- putting preferred items out of reach and encouraging children to request them using visuals that are easily accessible, for example at their eye level
- withholding part of an activity e.g. a puzzle piece
- putting objects in containers that the child needs help to open
- rather than giving children everything they need for an activity, 'be silly' and encourage them to request what they need. For example, give them the DVD cover without the DVD in it, or the train tracks without the trains
- make visuals available outside to encourage children to request preferred activities in various environments.

