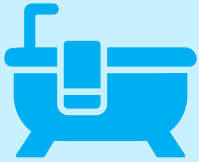


Visual Supports

Bath



Pajamas



Brush Teeth



Water



Book



Bed



Introduction

- ❑ **What are visual supports?** A visual support refers to using a picture or other item to communicate with a child who has difficulty understanding or using language. Visual supports can be photographs, drawings, objects, written words, or lists. Research has shown that visual supports work well as a way to communicate.

Visual supports are used to help caregivers, professionals, etc., communicate better with a child, and to help the child communicate better with others. The visual supports highlighted in this brochure focus on ways for caregivers to better communicate with a child with developmental disabilities.

This brochure introduces caregivers and professionals to visual supports and provides instruction on how to use them effectively. Although this brochure refers to children, visual supports can be used with persons of any age.

- ❑ **Why can it be important to use visual supports when communicating with a child?** First, some children may have difficulty communicating to others, such as their wants and needs, as well as difficulty understanding others' communication, such as following spoken instructions or verbal expectations. Visuals can promote positive ways to communicate both expressively and receptively - giving children a more concrete way to communicate to others as well as help caregivers communicate expectations. This

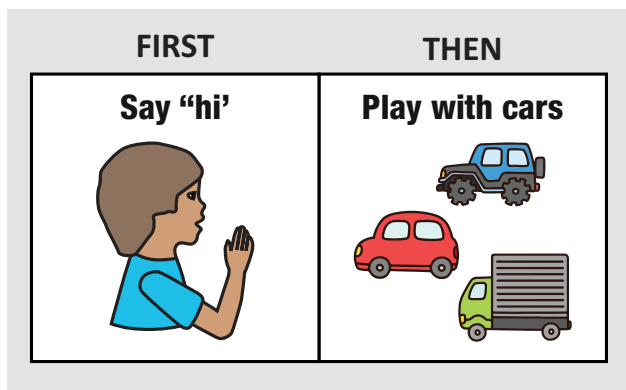
can decrease everyone's frustration and may help decrease unsafe behaviors that result from difficulty communicating.

Second, some children may understand social cues differently as they interact with others in daily activities. They may not fully grasp social expectations, like what choices they have in certain situations or how to adjust behavior based on unspoken social rules. Visual supports can help teach social skills and help children use these skills on their own in social situations.

Finally, some children may have difficulty understanding changes in routine or entering into unfamiliar situations. Visuals can help them understand what to expect and will happen next, which might reduce anxiety. Visuals can help children pay attention to important details and help them cope with change and be more independent.

First-Then Board

- ❑ **What is it?** A First-Then Board is a visual display of something your child prefers that will happen after completing a task that is less preferred.
- ❑ **When is it helpful?** A First-Then Board is helpful in teaching children to follow directions and learn new skills. It motivates them to do activities that may be harder for them and clarifies when they can do what they enjoy more. A First-Then Board lays the language foundation needed to complete multi-step directions and understand the cause and effect or work-reward concept.



- ❑ **How do I teach it and use it?** Decide what task you want your child to complete first (what goes in the “first” box) and the preferred item or activity (what goes in the “then” box) your child can have immediately after the “first” task is done. This preferred item/activity should be motivating enough to increase the likelihood your child will attempt to learn a new task or one that is harder for them.

Put the visuals on the board (e.g., photos, drawings, written words) that represent the activities you identified. Present the board to the child with a brief, verbal instruction. Try to use the least amount of words possible. For example, before beginning the “first” task, say, “First say hi, then play with cars.” If needed, refer to the board while your child is doing the task. For example, say “One more shoe, then swing” when your child is almost done.

When the “first” task is completed, refer back to the board. For example, say “All done putting on shoes, now swing!” and immediately provide the preferred, reinforcing item or activity.

In order to teach children the value of the First-Then Board, you must give them the reinforcing activity or item after they complete the “first” task, even if they needed some help in completing it. Otherwise, your child may not trust the board the next time you use it.

- ❑ **What if unsafe behaviors occur while using the First-Then Board?** If unsafe behaviors occur, continue by prompting (or helping) your child to complete the “first” task. Keep your focus on the task if you can, while blocking or preventing any unsafe behavior. Then it is important to still provide the reinforcing item or activity, since the focus of the board

is on completing the “first” task even if it may have been hard for them or you did most of it.

If you think unsafe behaviors may happen, begin by introducing the First-Then Board for a task that your child usually completes willingly and successfully. If behaviors become more unsafe, it may be appropriate to consider behavioral consultation with a professional to address these situations directly.

Visual Schedule

- ❑ **What is it?** A visual schedule is a visual representation of what is going to happen throughout the day or within an activity.
- ❑ **When is it helpful?** A visual schedule is helpful for breaking down an activity or part of the day that has multiple steps to encourage the teaching and independence of each step. It can also be helpful to communicate when certain activities will occur (such as the ones your child enjoys!), especially if transitions between activities are difficult or cause anxiety.
- ❑ **How do I teach it and use it?** Decide the activities that you will picture on the schedule. Choose activities that really will happen in that particular order. Try to mix in activities your child enjoys with the ones they may not enjoy or may be harder for them.

Put on the schedule the visuals (e.g., photos, drawings, written words) that show the activities that you have identified. The schedule can be portable, for example, on a binder or clipboard, or it can be fixed to a permanent place, like a refrigerator or wall. Your child should be able to see the entire schedule before beginning the first activity. It should continue to be visible to your child during the rest of the activities. There should also be some way that it is visually clear to your child when a task will be complete, such as marking it off, turning it over, or pulling it off of the schedule. You can use whichever format is going to make the most sense for your child.

When it is time for an activity on the schedule to occur, cue your child with a brief, verbal instruction. For example, say “Check the schedule.” This helps your child pay attention as the next activity begins. At first, you may need to guide your child to check the schedule (e.g., gently guide by shoulders and prompt your child

to point to the next activity on the schedule). You can gradually decrease prompts as your child begins to use the schedule more independently.

When a task is completed, cue your child to check the schedule again, using the procedure described above, and transition to the next activity.

Keep in mind, your goal is to teach your child to follow a schedule. Remember to provide praise and/or other positive reinforcement to your child for following the schedule and for transitioning to and completing activities on the schedule. It may be helpful to use a timer that your child can hear to make transition times clear to your child.

When you think your child is ready, mix variability into the schedule by introducing a symbol that represents an unknown activity or when a sudden change occurs in the schedule after you have already shown your child the schedule (e.g., “oops” or “surprise activity”). Begin to teach this concept by pairing this with a positive activity or surprise. Gradually use this for unexpected changes in the schedule. This will help teach your child to better handle changes in the day and promote flexibility.

☐ **What if unsafe behaviors occur while using the visual schedule?**

If unsafe behaviors occur, continue by prompting your child to complete the task that is occurring. Keep your focus on the task rather than the behavior. Then transition to the next activity as communicated by the schedule and still provide the reinforcing item or activities indicated on the schedule. The focus of the schedule is on completing the tasks, even if they need help.

If you think unsafe behaviors may happen, begin by introducing the visual schedule during tasks your child usually completes willingly and successfully. If behaviors become more unsafe, it may be appropriate to consider behavioral consultation with a professional to address these behaviors directly.

Visually Setting Parameters

☐ **What is it?** Setting parameters involves using visual supports to set clear boundaries around items or activities and to communicate basic expected behaviors, like waiting.

☐ **When is it helpful?** Visually setting parameters is helpful in communicating limits that are part of an activity and may seem unclear to your child. Some examples of situations where this might be useful follow. Visually setting parameters is helpful

in communicating limits that are part of an activity and may seem unclear to your child, such as placing a “not available” picture on the computer when it is not time to play on the computer.

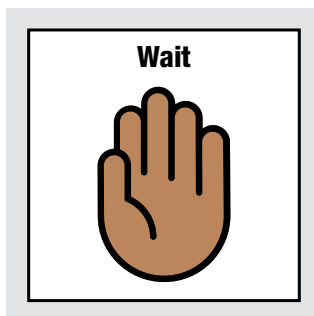
☐ **How do I teach it and use it?** Begin to teach the use of these visuals in situations that have clear, defined, brief parameters. As your child understands these visuals better, gradually increase their use in more long-term activities and with more abstract parameters.

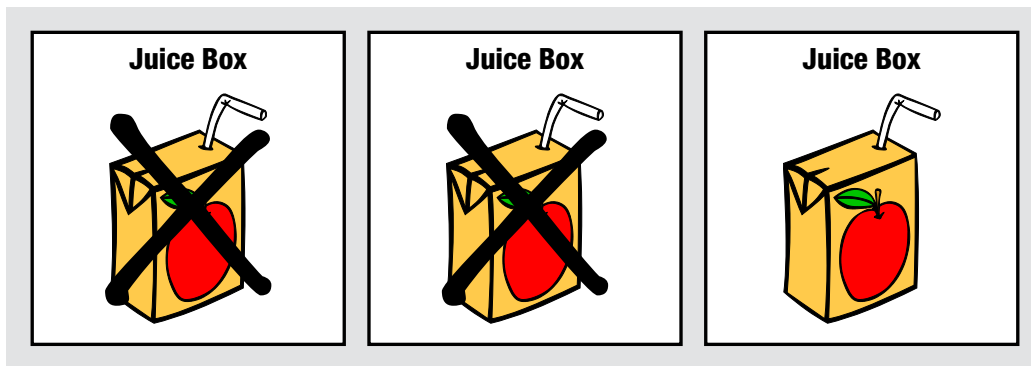
☐ **Examples:**

Physical boundaries: Place the visual on physical boundaries that already are defined (e.g., a door) and refer to it when the rule is followed. For example, when your child stops at the door, point to the stop sign and say, “Stop.” Give praise or reinforcement for

complying with this parameter. After you have taught the concept, use the same visual during other activities or in other settings where the same boundary is needed but is not as clear, such as a “Stop” sign on the playground.

Limited availability: Decide the number of times or length of time that the item or activity is available. Indicate that through the visual, for example, 3 pictures of a juice box on the refrigerator to indicate that 3 juice boxes are allowed that day. After the item or activity has been used or done, show the change by using the visual, for example, cross out or remove one of the juice box pictures. When the item is no longer available, use the visual to show this.





For example, show your child that there are no more pictures of juice on the refrigerator after they have used them all.

Wait: Begin by presenting the symbol for “wait” for a very brief amount of time before your child can have a preferred item or activity. It may help to pair the use of the “wait” symbol with a timer. Have your child trade the “wait” card for the item or activity. For example, when your child asks for a snack, hand your child the “wait” card, set the timer for 10 seconds, and then praise your child’s waiting and trade the snack for the “wait” card.

As your child learns to use visuals for setting parameters, gradually increase the length of time or the number of situations in which your child is expected to wait for items or activities.

- ❑ **What if unsafe behaviors occur while using visual parameters?** If you think that unsafe behaviors may occur, introduce these parameters during less difficult situations or begin with simple expectations.

If unsafe behaviors occur, be consistent with the parameters you have set. Focus on praising any aspects of the parameters that are being followed, rather than shifting your focus to the behaviors.

Using visual supports can help you and your child communicate and manage everyday activities in positive ways.

This publication was authored by Whitney Loring, PsyD, Associate Professor of Pediatrics and Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences, and Mary Hamilton, M.Ed., BCBA, TRIAD Educational and Behavioral Consultant. This work was supported through Beth Malow, M.D., M.S., Professor of Neurology, Principal Investigator, Vanderbilt Autism Treatment Network Site, and Zachary Warren, Ph.D., Professor of Pediatrics, Co-Principal Investigator, Vanderbilt Autism Treatment Network Site. It was edited and designed by the Communications staff of the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities. We are grateful for review and suggestions by many, including by faculty of TRIAD and by Autism Tennessee. This publication may be distributed in its original form at no cost. View more printable resources and materials online at vkc.vumc.org.

These materials are the product of the Autism Speaks Autism Treatment Network, a funded program of Autism Speaks. This publication was made possible, in part, by Grant no. T73MC00050 from the Maternal and Child Health Bureau (MCHB), Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the MCHB, HRSA, HHS.



VANDERBILT KENNEDY CENTER

FIRST

THEN

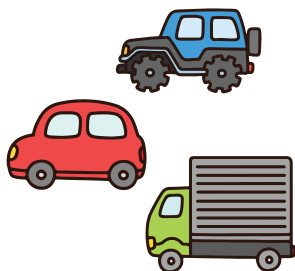
FIRST

THEN

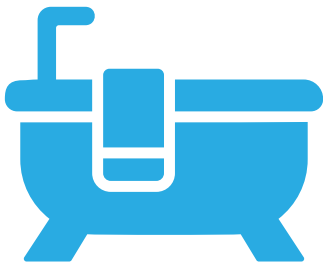
Say "hi"



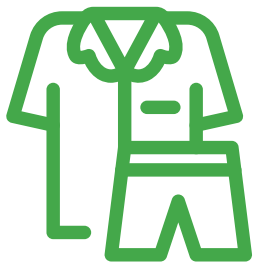
Play with cars



Bath



Pajamas



Brush Teeth



Water



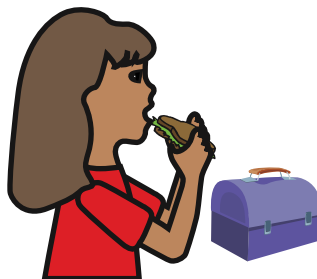
Book



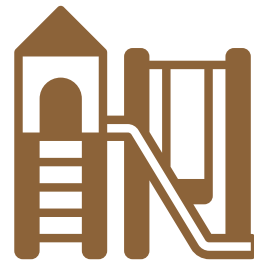
Bed



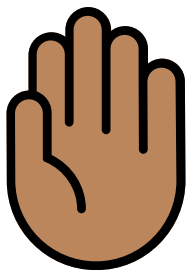
Eat Lunch



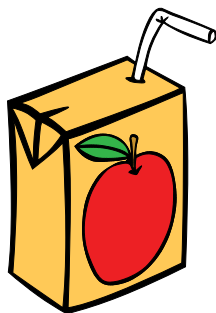
Playground



Wait



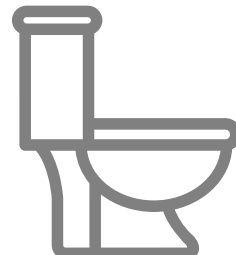
Juice Box



Get Dressed



Bathroom



Breakfast



Shoes



Backpack



Bus

