

Visual Supports and Autism Spectrum Disorders

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 with autistic children for two main purposes. They help caregivers communicate better with their child, and they help their child communicate better with others. The focus of this brochure is on helping caregivers communicate better with their child.

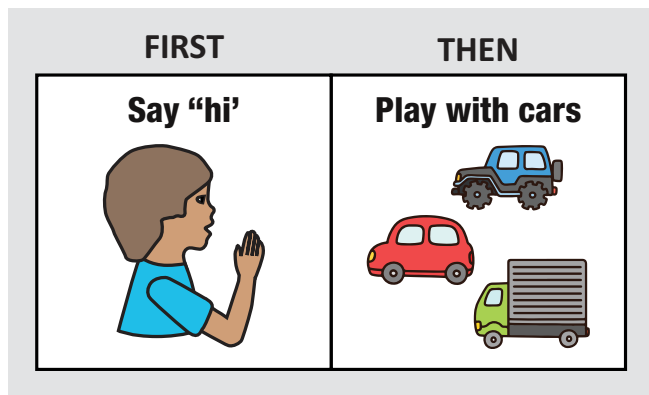
This brochure introduces parents, caregivers, and professionals to visual supports and provides instruction on how to use them effectively. Visual supports can be used with persons of any age, although this brochure refers to children. Also, visual supports can be used by caregivers other than parents.

- ❑ **Why are visual supports important?** The main features of autism can include differences in interacting socially and/or communicating in social situations, and having focused interests or repetitive behaviors. Visual supports can use the strengths of autistic children to help with areas of need.

First, autistic children may understand social cues differently as they interact with others in daily activities. They may not fully grasp social expectations, like how to start a conversation, how to respond when others make social approaches, or how to change behavior based on unspoken social rules. Visual supports can help teach social skills and help autistic children use them on their own in social situations.

Second, some autistic children may find it difficult to understand and follow only spoken instructions. They may not be able to express what they want or need as easily as other children. Visuals can help caregivers communicate what they expect. This can decrease the child's frustration and may help decrease unsafe behaviors that result from difficulty communicating. Visuals can promote positive ways to communicate.

Finally, some autistic 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 autistic 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 foundation needed to complete multi-step directions and activities 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) that 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 put on shoes, then swing.” 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 autistic 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.

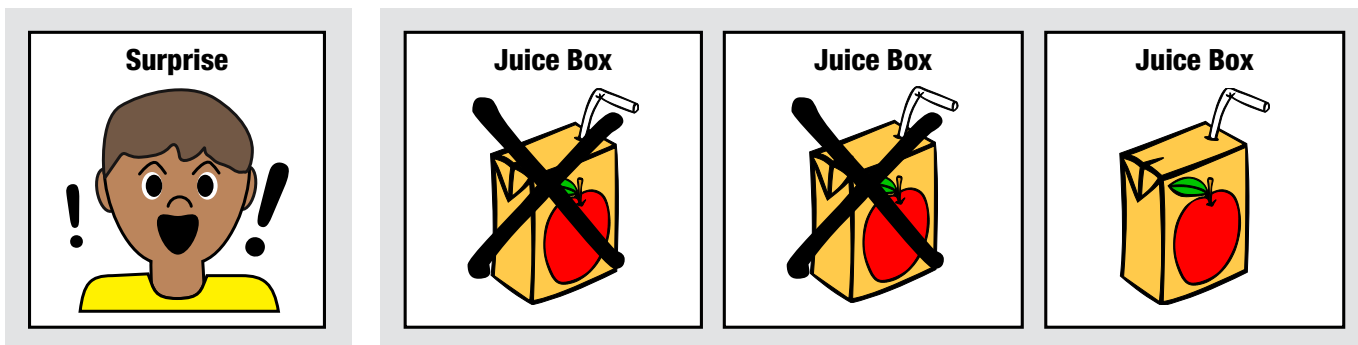
- ❑ **What if unsafe behaviors occur?** If unsafe behaviors occur, continue by prompting (or helping) your child to complete the “first” task. Keep your focus on the task if you can, while blocking or preventing any unsafe behavior. Then it is important to still provide the reinforcing item or activity,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



plete, 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. 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 from behind by the 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 and see 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 (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 tolerate changes in the day and promote flexibility.

- ❑ **What if unsafe behaviors occur?** If unsafe behaviors occur, continue by prompting your child to complete the task that is occurring. Keep your focus on the task rather

than on 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, since 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 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 behaviors directly.

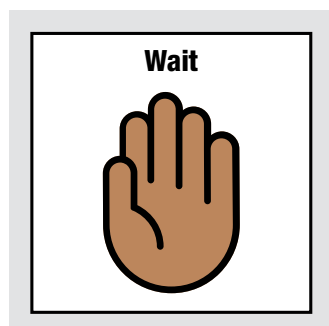
Visually Setting Parameters

- ❑ **What is it?** Setting parameters involves using visuals 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. Communicate physical boundaries of an area or activity, for example, use a “stop” sign to mark where to stop in the backyard or on a door when a caregiver is in the home office and not available. Or show how much of an item or activity is available before it is gone. For example, place a “not available” picture on the computer when it is not time to play on the computer. Or place pictures of 3 juice boxes on the refrigerator and remove or cover one each time juice is given. Show the need to wait for something that is delayed but will be available soon, for example, by providing a “wait” card paired with a timer.
- ❑ **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 and what they are expected to do while waiting.

❑ **What if unsafe behaviors occur?** If you think that unsafe behaviors may occur, introduce these parameters during less difficult situations or begin with simple expectations, like placing a stop sign somewhere where they already follow this rule.

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.

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