Autism and Behavior

VISUAL SUPPORTS AND STRATEGIES

| Classroom | Lesson/story | Color | Art |
| Read | Bathroom | Outside |

RETHINKING AUTISM: EMBRACING NEURODIVERSITY WITH ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY RESOURCE SERIES

Autism is a developmental disability that impacts social-communication skills and involves the presence of repetitive movements, actions, language patterns, or sensory-processing differences. Through a neurodiversity-affirming lens, these differences are seen as variations rather than deficits.

Visual supports (e.g., pictures, photos, objects, written words) support autistic students with tasks like communication, task completion, and self-regulation. Examples include calendars, visual schedules, timers, feelings charts, first/then boards, and social stories. These supports, often considered assistive technology (AT), are vital for autistic students, helping them become more independent, manage daily routines and transitions, identify internal sensations, and decrease behaviors that may interfere with engagement and learning. Visual supports can also be beneficial in improving functional skills and teaching new skills.

Visual supports are typically paper-based or rapid access supports that are separate from the student's AAC system. This separation allows for a distinction between the expectations of the classroom and student communication. Visual supports can be added to a student's high-tech AAC system, but care must be taken to ensure that communication is seen as the priority of the device and not a place to provide directives. If visual supports are used on a device, consider placing them on a separate page from the home screen. Ensure adults are providing motivating activities alongside the visual supports to promote positive experiences.

There are many types of AT that are effective for aiding students with increasing flexibility and predictability for those who struggle with change or transitioning. This can be beneficial for students who are having difficulty with transitions and can also support all students within the classroom. Visual support such as visual timers are beneficial for supporting upcoming change or completion of the activity. Effective implementation of these visual supports can be beneficial for all students in a classroom by aiding them in learning time management and achieving independence with multi-step tasks.

The chart below provides general strategies and examples of visual supports. These supports should be individualized based on the student, environment, task, and specific behavioral challenges.

EXAMPLE STRATEGIES TO AID EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF VISUAL SUPPORTS		
General Strategies	**Teach and Model**	Introduce visual supports and model their use in naturalistic opportunities. Explicitly teaching these supports helps students understand the purpose and how to integrate them throughout their daily routines.
	Make Them Easy to Follow	Ensure that visual supports are easy to use and readily available. They should also be clear and concise to reduce visual overstimulation.
	Fade Slowly	Continue using visual supports even after they are taught; avoid fading them too quickly (if at all) to prevent regression of positive behavior/outcomes. If you believe the student has mastered the skill and no longer requires visual supports, gradually remove them to verify their level of independence. Some visual supports, such as schedules or timers, may stay in place or evolve throughout the student's life.
	Decrease Verbal Input	Use of minimal verbal input with visual supports can be helpful initially but be mindful not to overload the student's sensory system by continually talking/explaining tasks.
	Provide Wait Time	Allow time for the student to process information and respond appropriately to activities or settings.

EXAMPLE STRATEGIES TO AID EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF VISUAL SUPPORTS	
Setting Up the Environment	» Use visual timers to prepare the student for the end of an activity and help them anticipate a change. » Help the student anticipate each step in the day and gain awareness of changes in schedule by using visual schedules, first/then boards, and task strips. Use of visual schedules also encourage on-task behavior. » Acknowledge desired behavior by using a simple happy face, green for good, or other positive visual. » Encourage turn taking with toys through my turn/your turn visuals. » Use a wait or stop visual if the desired item is not available to communicate that you understand the request, but the student needs to wait. » Assist the student in expressing how they are feeling at a given moment through emotion identification visuals. » Help students with selecting the appropriate response to the situation through a calm down chart. » Use wearable visuals for rapid access to single messages for behavioral needs such as "walk" or "quiet" to decrease communication demands.
Explaining in "To Do" Terms	» Display "to do" visuals for classroom rules and expected behaviors. » Use lanyards, belt clips, or wrist visuals to show desired behavior. » Place visuals on desks or tables as a visual cue of the expected behaviors.
Positive Reinforcement	» Create a social story to promote social understanding by describing how the student has demonstrated success with a desired behavior. » Use a token board to visually acknowledge positive behavior. » Give simple visuals to students demonstrating appropriate behavior. The visuals can be exchanged for a desired object or activity later.
Disruptive Behaviors	» Read social stories as a visual support/reminder of expected behavior in various environments; it is important to remember that social stories are presented during the absence of disruptive behaviors and to increase the social understanding of the student. » Use a first/then board to help the student see what needs to be completed before moving on. » Pair visual supports with a visual timer to redirect the student from disruptive behaviors to the desired task. » Use an emotion chart with a calming chart to help the student identify their internal state and learn how to independently use strategies to respond appropriately to their emotions.

STRATEGY TO AID EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF VISUAL SUPPORTS		
Multiple Step Prompting	**"Say"**	Say the desired behavior and highlight a single visual to enhance the verbal prompt. For example, if you want the student to walk, remind them verbally to use walking feet and simultaneously show them a visual. By pairing the verbal and visual, the student can learn to complete the desired task when seeing the visual.
	"Show/ Model"	If the student does not respond, bring attention to the visual and wait for the student to recall the paired response. Repeat the verbal prompt again or provide an indirect prompt such as "What do we need to do next?"
	"Wait"	Wait time is very important. Allow the student time to process the request and respond.
	"Do/ Model Again"	If needed, walk with the student. Consistently show the visual support with or without verbal cues as needed. Provide the student time to process the request and utilize visual supports for reinforcement and a visual reminder of what the student is working for.

This series of resources explores how assistive technology (AT) can be used to support autistic students and reduce behaviors that may interfere with engagement and learning, with the goal of enhancing independence and participating in their education. The handouts in this series include:
- ❑ Autism and Behavior: A Neuro-Affirming Approach Using Assistive Technology
- ❑ Autism and Behavior: AAC Supports and Strategies
- ❑ Autism and Behavior: Visual Supports and Strategies
- ❑ Autism and Behavior: Sensory Supports and Strategies

REFERENCES
- ❑ Havlik, K. (n.d.). Visual Schedules: A Practical Guide for Families. https://ed-psych.utah.edu/school-psych/_resources/documents/grants/autism-training-grant/Visual-Schedules-Practical-Guide-for-Families.pdf.