

# 05

Visual supports:

## Cues, reminders & schedules

Goal of this Chapter: To explain how modifying the environment to capitalize on visual strengths maximizes learning and independence.





## Meeting our students' needs

Modifying the environment to meet our students' needs will maximize their learning and thereafter their independence level. The typical classroom environment relies on verbalization as the primary mode of communication. Communication can be more efficient when capitalizing on student's visual strengths.

## Types of visual supports

Type of Visuals can take a range of forms such as schedules, first-then boards, single pictures, scripts and social information.

Visual supports can also be used on a larger scale to organize the classroom. For example, a quiet reading corner or group seating areas can be shown using different flooring, mats or by putting tape on the floor. Materials can be arranged visually and labelled so that students can access them easily. Visuals can be individualized such as using a small mat to sit on in class. The student can then take the mat to assembly to remind them to stay seated and keep their body within the boundary of the mat.

Choose the type of visual support. This could be:

- a single picture to show the next activity
- a picture showing the materials the student needs to collect for an activity, e.g. show pictures of scissors, glue, pencil and worksheet that the student needs to collect
- a series of pictures showing the steps in an activity, e.g. organise a sequence of pictures to show 'First cut out, then glue pictures onto the worksheet, then label the pictures' information about people.
- a social narrative that helps a student understanding a situation (see the social narratives factsheet).

## Creating visual supports

Visuals can be used to support any situation where a student would benefit from more information or more concrete information about a task, situation or activity.

The symbols you use should be based on what the student understands. Most of the time photos are easier to understand than pictures, e.g. a photo of the assembly hall will be more recognizable than a generic picture of a school hall.

It is often best to create a blank template that you can put pictures on and take them off as needed. Print pictures or photos separately; cut out and laminate as needed. Attach pictures to the visual support template using Velcro or similar.

Show the visual to the student before the task. Students need to learn to use visual supports and will often benefit from plenty of time to look at the visual and modelling how to use them.

To become meaningful, use a carry and match object or picture. For example, the student matches the toothbrush picture on the schedule with the actual object in the bathroom. This helps him understand that the toothbrush picture means he has to brush his teeth. This strategy can be faded once the individual moves to where the picture/ object suggests independently. Then he can mark off or move the picture and put it in a socket/envelope once it's done.

Place the visual where the student can see it easily. This could be on the white board, the student's desk or on a wall. Make sure the visual is accessible to the student/s who need it.

Monitor the student and the use of the visual support. If it does not seem to be helping, try the following: change the type of symbols used to make sure the student understands, make the format simpler, with fewer pictures or steps, ensure you are using simple language when using the visual, make sure that the student has enough time to look at the visual to understand it.

Visual supports can be made using specialised software, photos taken by the teacher, or using images from photo libraries on the internet. They can also be hand drawn or simple word documents, depending on the needs of the student. They need to clearly represent the important information. Words can be added as a prompt to teachers and other adults to use simple, consistent language when using the visual support.

In the TEACCH method, **visual schedules** and **visual reminders** (often-referred to as visual cues or instructions) serve two distinct but complementary functions within Structured Teaching.

### Visual Schedule: The "Where" and "When"

The visual schedule is the macro-level tool. Its primary purpose is to provide an overview of the day or a specific period to reduce anxiety and increase predictability.

- **Function:** It tells the student what activities will happen, in what order, and where they need to go.
- **Structure:** Usually a sequential list (top-to-bottom or left-to-right) using objects, photos, icons, or words.
- **Goal:** To help the student transition independently between different areas of the classroom (e.g., from the "Work Station" to the "Recess Area").
- **Example:** A strip on the wall showing: *Arrival* → *Circle Time* → *Individual Work* → *Break* → *Lunch*.

### Visual Reminder/ Cue: The "How"

A visual reminder or visual instruction is a micro-level tool. It is used once the student has arrived at a specific activity.

- **Function:** It clarifies **how** to complete a specific task or what the expectations are for a specific behavior.
- **Structure:** These can be labels, task analysis (step-by-step instructions), or Choice Boards.
- **Goal:** To promote independence *within* an activity so the student does not have to wait for a teacher to tell them the next step.
- **Example:** A "Visual Instruction" inside a workstation showing the 3 steps to assemble a folder, or a "Visual Reminder" on a desk that says "Quiet Feet" or "Raise Hand."

## Key Differences at a Glance

Feature	Visual Schedule	Visual Reminder / Cue
Primary Question	"What am I doing next?"	"How do I do this right now?"
Scope	Global (The whole day/session)	Specific (A single task or behavior)
Location	Transition area or portable binder	Directly at the point of action (desk, bin, door)
Outcome	Smooth transitions between places	Mastery and independence within a task

### Why use both?

If you only have a **schedule**, the student might get to the desk but then sit idle because they don't know how to start the work. If you only have **reminders**, the student may work well but become highly anxious or "stuck" because they don't know when the work will end or what happens next. Together, they create a complete "roadmap" for the student's day.

## The Function of the Visual Schedule

A visual schedule is the tool that transforms abstract time into concrete visual information. It helps the student transition between activities with less anxiety by answering: "What comes next?". A visual schedule is an arrangement of pictures or symbols that show the particular order that a sequence of tasks is performed (Banda et al., 2009; Fowkes, 2022).

Visual schedules do not consist strictly of icons. A visual schedule does not necessarily have to include icons. It can be composed of icons, it may include them, or it could consist of physical objects representing the student's activities. It might simply be a chronological list of the day's lessons, color-coded for clarity, or even just a sequence of numbers. While all students benefit from having a schedule, students on the autism spectrum require a higher degree of organization and simplification. Knowing the student and how much information they need guides us on how to create a visual schedule, a mini schedule or a work system and it is critical when we create visual directions.

Visual schedules help to familiarize students with the classroom, they do this by showing an expected order of activities using written language,

pictures, and/or symbols (Macdonald et al., 2018). There are between-activity schedules and within-activity schedules (Curtin & Long, 2021). Between activity schedules act as a visual sequence of events moving students from one task to another and helping with transitions, within-activity schedules act more as a visual task sequence of the steps required to complete a single task (Curtin & Long, 2021).

A schedule can incorporate a cue to help students remember what is happening that day, help them be ready for the activities and changes happening in the day which can help reduce anxiety that the students might feel (Cramer et al., 2011). In addition to helping students follow a routine, visual schedules have been shown to be an effective antecedent strategy in reducing problematic behaviors (Macdonald et al., 2018, King, 2015).

Visual schedules can be helpful in removing the dependence students have on adults to give assurance and support during planned and unplanned changes in their daily schedule (Banda et al., 2009).

Activity schedules can also help students “develop a positive routine of looking for information and thus increase flexibility and the ability to cope with life’s ups and downs in the future” (Davies, 2008, p.18).

While visual schedules fill the function of providing a pattern for the activities that are to be completed, they can also have multiple advantages such as relieving the stress of transitions, independent completion of tasks, following routines, and increasing executive function abilities (Fowkes, 2022). Using visual schedules can help decrease maladaptive or undesired behaviors during transition periods (Connelly, 2017).

When teaching a routine, students have more success if the steps of the routine are shown in a practical and applicable sequence with a distinctive beginning and end (Schneider & Goldstein, 2010).

There are five main considerations for creating and using a visual schedule:

- How long the schedule is
- How students interact with the schedule
- Where the schedule is presented (stable or transferred)
- How students initiate the routine of following the schedule

- How the schedule is presented

Types of visual schedules according to the level of representation

- Object Level: Using real items (e.g., a spoon for lunch).
- Photograph Level: Realistic photos of the classroom.
- Picture Level: Abstract symbols (e.g., PECS icons).
- Word Level: Written lists for students who can read.

### Object Schedules

These are most appropriate for individuals who have fewer language skills. They can be used for very young children up to adults. The simplest way to use an object schedule is to hand an object to the student just before he is about to move to the next activity. The individual then takes the object and uses it in the next activity. Start by making a list of which objects you are going to use to represent each activity your child does.

### Picture or Photograph Schedules

If the student attends to photos or pictures in books or magazines, and can consistently match pictures or photos, they may be ready for a picture-based schedule. Some people respond better to actual photographs of the activity, whereas other may prefer computerized depictions.

### Written Schedules

Written schedules are used for students who are fluent readers. If the student is able to recognize words, you can start with adding words to his or her picture schedule. Some individuals respond well to schedules that are located on an electronic device.

### Using a visual schedule

Decide on the length of the schedule. Beginning learners start with being handed an object or photograph representing the next activity. Once they understand this process, you can begin to introduce a “First-then” schedule that shows a sequence of two activities. Some individuals benefit from always using a First-then schedule, while others may be able handle more information, incorporating three, four, or a whole day’s worth of activities.

Observe your child and notice the number of items he or she can handle at one time.

Decide how you will track progress using the schedule. There are a number of different ways to mark off activities on a schedule. Marking off the activity helps the person know where they are and see that they are making progress through the schedule. For younger children, it is often helpful to start by having the child remove the item from his or her schedule as an activity is completed so that there is a clear representation that the activity is finished. Sometimes the removed item is put in a “finished” area near their schedule, such as a basket or pocket at the bottom of the schedule. There are other variations such as turning over each picture of a picture schedule when the activity is complete or moving it from the “to do” side (left side) of the page to the “finished” side (right side) of the page. For written schedules, students can cross a line through activities as they have finished them or put a check in a checkbox.

Some individuals benefit from carrying the object or picture to the location they are moving to, and matching it with Velcro to a similar object or picture. This is helpful for children who do not transition independently because they get distracted or forget where their schedule told them to go.

Decide on the cue you are going to use to get the person to check their schedule. The simplest cue is to place the object representing the next activity into the person’s hand. In this case, the schedule is brought to the individual. When a child is able to travel independently to their schedule to check it, one of the best methods to use it to give them a visual cue to “*check schedule.*” Using a visual cue removes language demands that may not be processed well, especially if the person is highly anxious. A visual cue also helps a person who may be distracted and who may have forgotten they were supposed to check their schedule. Examples of visual cues are a picture matched to a similar image on the schedule, or to a pencil to check off the schedule.

Teach the person to use his or her schedule. Like any new concept, using a schedule is something that you need to teach. For an individual with little or low verbal understanding, you can do this by placing the object or picture in their hand and gently physically guiding them (from behind) to go to the desired area.

For individuals with more verbal skills, you can explain the concept of schedules, and then show them how to use their schedule, either by guiding them or by modeling using the schedule yourself. For very bright children, you might also choose to show them the scheduling system you use in your own life, to help them understand why it is important to use a schedule, and to help them accept using it.

Be consistent and modify as needed. Incorporating the schedule into a regular routine will help the person develop more independence with it and will maximize its benefits. The person will quickly learn to trust the schedule, and will be more able to handle changes in their schedule and daily routine. Having a child experience the benefits of keeping a schedule when they are young, you are paving the way for them to use one as they grow. This will become important as they need to become increasingly organized and independent.

### Teaching a student how to use a schedule

- Guided practice
- Independent practice
- Systematically fading components of the schedule (fading the prompt, not the structure)
- Some students may always need redirection to follow through their schedule.

### Key to success with using a schedule

- Stick to the schedule
- Use it consistently – not just every now and then
- Create it to be both cognitively and age appropriate

Some considerations to keep in mind when using a visual schedule:

- Some visual schedules can take time to create and maintain. Typically, the work put in up front saves time in the end dealing with behavior problems and prompting your son or daughter through activities.

- You may need to make modifications along the way. If the schedule does not seem to be working, this typically means that it needs to be adjusted, not that schedules are ineffective or unnecessary for your child.
- Visual schedules do not need to be perfect, computer printed, and laminated. Many children respond to handwritten schedules with hand drawn pictures.
- If your child is not interested in his schedule, consider incorporating a special interest, a reward system (for older children who understand cause and effect), or changing it if the schedule is confusing or unappealing in some way.
- Your child may or may not need a schedule all the time. Consider using it during times of the day when your child seems to have difficulty following directions, being independent, or is or is consistently anxious about what will happen.
- As you child grows and learns new skills, the format of the schedule will grow with him.

## Using schedules to teach flexibility

One of the key items of evidence to support the diagnosis of autism is an insistence on sameness and an inflexible adherence to routines extending down to minute details with things like the placement of toys, silverware, or bath towel or into types of foods available at certain meals and the order in which they may be eaten or the exact words and even tone of voice used in a bedtime story. Not all changes are equal and not all ASD people react the same way. Many autistics confronted with a minor change in their daily routine or living situation might feel uncomfortable but have sufficient self-control to show no outward signs.

Using visual aids and other methods of communicating that are easier for ASD individuals to understand can also be helpful. Much of the shock of changes comes from the difficulty they have in making sense of what is happening in short time. Sensory and verbal communication deficits make it difficult for them to quickly grasp new situations. Accommodating their strengths in visual perception versus verbal and social skills when

discussing changes can help them settle in more rapidly and feel more at ease with the situation.

Flexibility is crucial, as schedules may need to change occasionally. Leave room for spontaneity, and adjust the schedule when necessary. For example, if plans change, communicate it visually to prepare the individual for the adjustment.

For example, adding a question mark icon on the schedule can prepare the student for an unexpected change or something exciting that is about to occur. This could mean that seeing a question mark icon, they know something different is about to happen. Gradually, unexpected changes become part of their day and they get manageable. We are teaching flexibility through predictability.

## Important points to remember

There is no good or bad schedule.  
The best schedule is the one that the student uses independently.

A common mistake while creating a schedule is using materials that do not match the student's developmental level.

In order for the student to use the schedule independently, the visual schedule must be meaningful to this particular student.

A mixed type of schedule is using the picture along with the word it represents.

A common puzzle is the fact that the student finishes an activity but not transit to next one independently.

Some students will remain prompt dependent no matter how much we try. It is considered a progress to finish each step independently.

