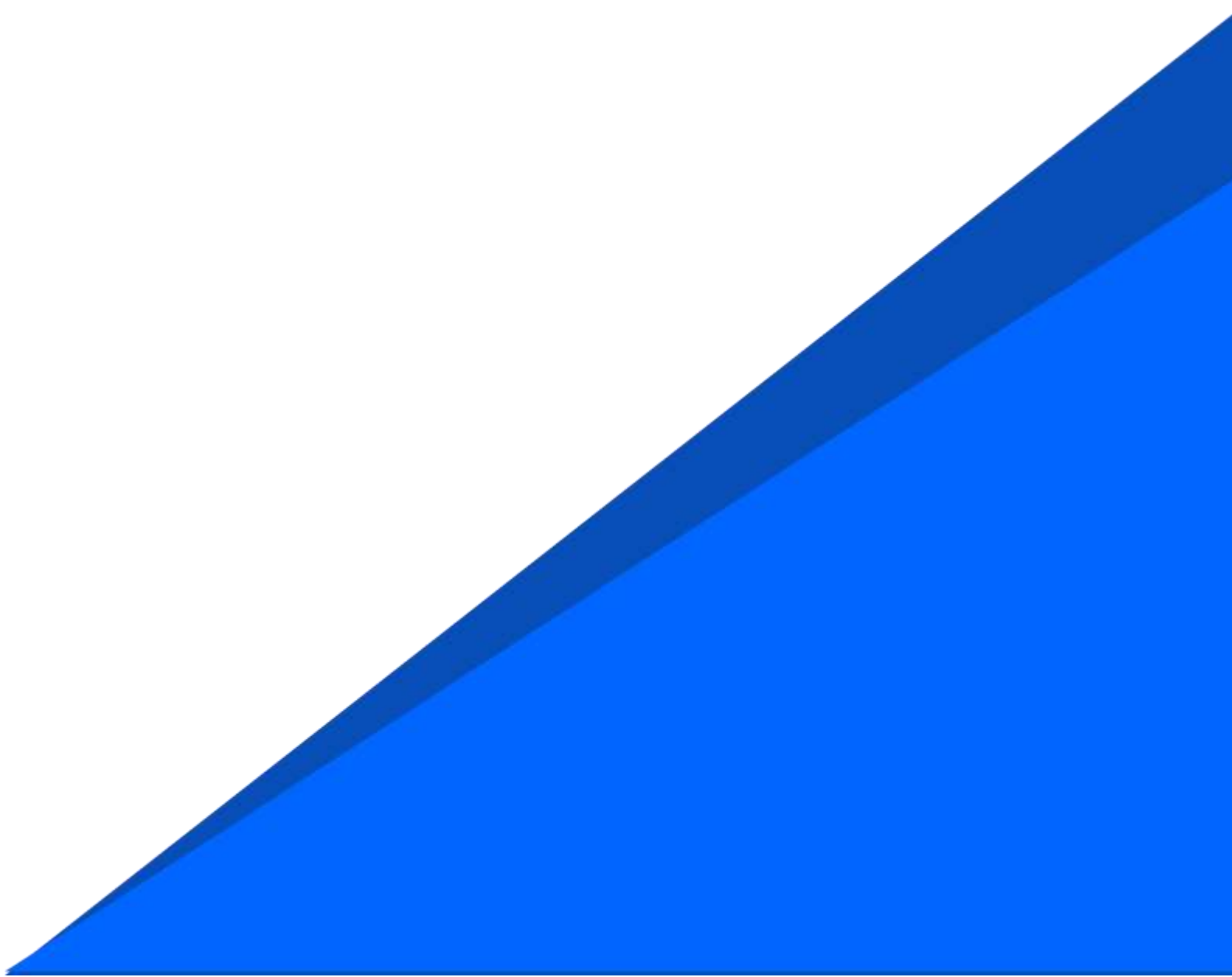


06

The Work system

Goal of this Chapter: To define the Work System as a path to independence.



Individualized Work Systems – The Path to Independence

What is a Work System?

While the Visual Schedule tells the student where to go, the Work System tells them what to do once they arrive. The TEACCH Independent Work System is based on the clinical observation that most individuals on the autism spectrum possess significantly stronger visual-spatial processing skills compared to auditory processing. These systems are strategically designed to capitalize on these strengths, providing a predictable structure that minimizes reliance on verbal instructions.

Structural Design

To foster independence, every work system must be organized from **left-to-right** and **top-to-bottom**. A student should be able to look at their workstation and independently answer:

1. **What work** do I need to complete?
2. **How much** work is required? (Quantified by the number of folders, baskets, or icons).
3. **How do I know I am finished?** (The material is gone or placed in a "Finished" area).
4. **What happens next?** (Access to a reinforcing activity or the next transition).

The Role of the Schedule

While physical baskets provide a clear visual of the work, the inclusion of a schedule or to-do list is a critical, yet often overlooked, element. The schedule acts as the teaching platform that transitions the student from a passive role (working only on what is placed directly in front of them) to an active role.

The ultimate goal is for the student to use their schedule to:

- Identify required tasks.
- Retrieve materials independently from another area.

- Return completed work to the designated "Finished" location.

Content Selection: Mastered Tasks Only

A common implementation error is placing emerging skills into a work system and expect the student work alone. It is imperative to remember: Independent work systems are designed to teach independence, not new academic concepts. The student must previously master all tasks placed in the system at some point.

If a student requires a prompt to complete a task, the task is inappropriate for the work system. We teach math and language in other settings; we use the work system to teach the student how to apply those skills autonomously. The time and area for teaching the skills is indicated on their schedule (working with Mary) or by placing an extra card on a task on the work system to ask for help.

Task Completion and the "Finished" Area

When a task is completed, it must be placed in a designated "Finished" area (a basket, folder, bin, back to the initial place). It is essential that students do not take their work apart after completion. Taking work apart undermines the "concept of finished". Just as a typical student would not be asked to erase an essay after writing it, a student with ASD should not be asked to disassemble a completed task unless he wants to. Maintaining the integrity of finished work mimics real-world expectations, such as in vocational settings (e.g., a restaurant worker does not empty salt shakers after filling them).

Evidence-Based Benefits

Research (Hume & Odom, 2007; Bennett, Reichow, & Wolery, 2011) supports the efficacy of independent work systems in:

- Increasing on-task behavior.
- Significantly reducing teacher prompts.
- Decreasing stereotypical or self-stimulatory behaviors by providing a clear, functional focus.

By implementing these systems correctly, we provide students with an organizational strategy they can generalize to homework, chores, leisure activities, and future employment.

Why Do Work Systems Fail?

Many students still rely on verbal instructions. This often happens because the tasks are too difficult and complicated for their developmental level or the concept of "Finished" is not visually clear.

Many teachers or parents stop using schedules and work systems because their student or child show dislike or refuse to follow through. This is natural to happen because no one likes to be told what to do.

Many times, it feels overwhelming to create the schedule and the sub-routines for the whole day and consider everything that needs to be done or may change unexpectedly during the day.

What can be done then?

To help the student follow a routine and a schedule build in motivation incorporate preferred activities into the schedule. This could be spending time with a special person, getting access to a favorite toy or snack, getting an electronic device, etc. Bear in mind that it needs a long period of practice (depending on the individual) to start following the schedule independently. When an expanse of schedule is completed, offer positive reinforcement toward something special. Working towards a goal will get the person engaged.

When creating a daily schedule there is no need to include everything. For starters, that have just introduced to schedules, structure only chunks of the day.

Scheduled breaks

Scheduled breaks are, as they sound, regularly scheduled breaks during activities that can help students engage in learning without exhibiting disruptive behaviors. A scheduled break can assist students to find relief from overwhelming sensory or social environments and may help to reduce stress or anxiety during group activities. Students should learn to recognize when they feel overwhelmed and ask for a break pointing to the break card. This strategy requires providing clear rules of how to use and when to use break cards as well as creating a system to monitor overuse.

Incorporating scheduled breaks during lesson time or recess time to teach a shared activity can be done simply by putting a break card on both

students' work system/ visual schedule and an activity card directing them to a specific place for this particular thing.

For students in the classroom, the teacher may provide all students with scheduled breaks or individual students may be provided with short, frequent breaks on a timed schedule. These breaks may consist of very short periods of unscheduled free time, or planned breaks that are longer and involve a preferred task or opportunity to leave the room (e.g. time in the book corner, running an errand). Using a timer that will alert them that it is time for a break is another strategy.

The literature on behavior support also includes the more technical term 'non-contingent escape'. This involves providing students with a scheduled break, generally from non-preferred activities, that is based on time intervals, rather than being contingent on a particular behavior or skill. There is some evidence that these scheduled breaks can help to decrease disruptive behaviors, especially when a behavior is related to an escape function. By providing the scheduled breaks, the student has less need to use disruptive behaviors to escape from a non-preferred task.

