



Visual Supports: Helping Your Child Understand and Communicate

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Communication is a common problem in children who have autism and related disabilities. They often have difficulty understanding even the simplest spoken communication from others. Because of this they have problems knowing what is or isn't happening during their day and why changes occur in their routine. They may have difficulty switching from one activity to the next and understanding why they cannot do something they want to do at a particular time.

Visual supports such as those described by Hodgdon (1995, 1997), Quill (1995), Dalrymple (1995) and Roberson, Gravel, Valcante and Maurer (1992) are helping children who do not have conventional communication systems to become more able communication partners. The use of pictures to support our communication with persons who have communication impairments has been common for some time. Over 20 years ago, Robinson-Wilson (1977) demonstrated that sequenced pictures could help persons with disabilities to follow picture recipes based on previously published cookbooks.

Although the use of visual media has been shown to be effective for communicating with persons who have disabilities for some time, their use with persons who have autism has become very popular recently. This web site will help you to become more familiar with the uses and benefits of visual supports. For additional information, the works mentioned above are referenced at the end of this document.

Many children with autism and related disabilities have strong visual skills, and these strengths can be capitalized on with visual supports. These supports both aid communication and create structure, which can help children be more active, independent and successful participants in their lives.

When somebody speaks to us we also see things like body language, gestures, objects and symbols, which make it easier for us to understand their message. These things are called visual supports.

In a typical conversation less than ten percent of the message is the actual spoken words. The rest is made up of visual components like body language and vocal components like volume. An example of this is if you are having a disagreement with someone and they finally say, "Fine." That may be what they say but their gestures, facial expression and even how they say it tells you it is anything but fine. The actual word is just a small part of their message and is not consistent with what they really feel.

Why are visual messages easier to understand? Visual messages are non-transient, meaning they stay around until you can accomplish what you want with the information. On the other hand, auditory messages are transient, often coming and going quickly. Below are some examples:

Often when you ask someone for directions, you write them down or draw a map because it is easier for you to understand and/or remember. Otherwise the information comes and goes so quickly that you cannot keep it straight. For a child with disabilities even the simplest directions can come and go too quickly for them to process and understand. A visual support can really help them understand the message.

Visual communication tools such as objects, photographs, picture symbols, daily schedules, calendars and choice boards can provide the support necessary to greatly improve a child's understanding and ability to communicate.

How to start:

Where To Begin With Visual Supports

1. Decide what the visual supports need to do



- Provide choices
- Provide information about upcoming activities or people's whereabouts
- Help with transitions
- Help complete a task involving lots of steps

2. What does your child understand?

- Photographs
- Picture symbols
- Food labels
- Written words

Remember that you don't want your child to have to struggle to understand what the individual pictures mean. You don't put your appointments on your calendar in another language; so don't use visual supports that are difficult for your child to interpret. Abstract images can be hard for some children to understand so you may need to use a photograph instead of a picture symbol. Using colored and/or larger sized pictures can also help your child understand more easily. Also remember to put the exact word on a symbol that you use with your child. If you ask your child if he needs to go potty, don't put toilet or bathroom on his picture symbol, put potty.

3. Gather labels, make picture symbols, take photographs

- Make them easily identifiable to your child
- Make sure the picture clearly focuses on one and only one thing

Don't take a picture of the whole living room if the object you need is the television. Make sure things are not blurry, not too dark or hidden by the reflection of a flash. Also beware of possible shadows caused by bubbles in the laminating paper.

If the object you want is the television, take a picture of just the television.

4. Make them durable

- Paste photos to poster board
- Laminate picture symbols with clear contact paper
- Attach Velcro or magnets to the back

5. Decide on location and framework

- What is the logical location for things?

Put food choices on the refrigerator. Pick a good central location in the house for the schedule, maybe on a wall in the kitchen or living room. If your child moves around a lot, playing inside and

outside, you may want to create a portable schedule out of a photo album or three ring notebook that she can take with her.

What is a helpful way to hang the symbols?

You can use poster board or a non-shag carpet remnant with Velcro, a bulletin board, a magnet board, or for portable schedules, a photo album or three ring binder.

Use a stop pocket or box with schedules.

It is a good idea to use a stop pocket or box with a picture schedule. This is a place, like a basket or envelope, where your child can put a symbol can be put at the end of each activity. It can also double as a way for your



child to say he would like to end an activity. Another option is to have your child simply turn the pictures over as each activity is finished.

References

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