

# STRATEGIES FOR WORKING WITH CHILDREN WITH AUTISM: VISUAL SCHEDULES

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This is the second article in a series that discusses strategies for working with children who are deaf and have autism. The first article provided an overview of strategies to support communication at home and in the community. This article will provide an in-depth description and examples of visual schedules. Research has shown that Visual Schedules are an effective tool for working with deaf children with autism (Bryan & Gast. 2000).

Deaf children with autism struggle in three areas: communication, behavior, and socialization (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2000). More specifically, the characteristics include reliance on adults, difficulty in transitioning from one activity to another and having a need for structure and predictable routines (APA, 2000; Bryan & Gast, 2000; Dawson, Melzoff, & Osterling, 1995). Visual Schedules support the development of communication, behavior, and independence. They present cues that enable children to predict what will happen next and reduce anxiety by providing a visual of the day or task to be completed. In doing so, Visual Schedules also promote peaceful transitions.

## **Overview of visual schedules**

Visual Schedules illustrate a sequence of a day's events and steps to complete a task. They create a structure that helps children independently transition between activities (showing the current activity, the next activity, and any changes that arise) using real objects, photographs, drawings, or words. Visual Schedules may be static or interactive. They could be a pre-printed schedules that the children follow everyday or interactive where the child is required to move completed activities to a location.

## **Classroom Application**

Visual Schedules have been used in classrooms for over 30 years. Educators use Visual Schedules in a variety of ways to meet the needs of individual students and classroom routines. One example is a classroom schedule that has pictures to show the different events happening that day, such as specials and support services. (picture) Another way teachers use visual

schedules with students is to develop a task analysis for individual students to help the complete a specific activity (picture).

## **Home and Community**

It is important for families to know which types of Visual Schedules the teacher is using with their child in school in order to know which type of schedule would be beneficial to use at home and best meet your child's individual needs. So, you can work with the teacher to develop Visual Schedules to be used at home and make decisions about how to implement them. This is important to ensure consistency between the child's environments. Below are examples of visual schedules that you can modify for use at home.

*Checklists and Organizers* work best with children who forget or confuse steps in a process, who are easily distracted, and who are overly dependent on adult support. Checklists and organizers provide a visual guide showing individual steps to complete a task. They can be developed for simple one-step tasks (e.g., putting dishes in the sink after eating or recycling a can) to more complex multi-step tasks (e.g., getting dressed or brushing teeth). Checklists and organizers can be interactive by using Velcro strips allowing the child to move each step after it has been completed. They can also be static by posting the steps on a wall near where the task is performed.

*Information sharers* work best with children who have difficulty recalling the events of their day, remembering where people are, organizing their thoughts, and understanding questions (Savner & Myles, 2000). Information sharers tell about things that happen over a specific period of time (e.g., an evening, one day or a month) and can help children and parents to start conversations. Information sharers take a variety of forms. They can show activities that happen during the day. For children who are nonverbal or have difficulty relating the day's events, real objects could be incorporated into the information sharer. For children with more language sentence starters can be used to prompt recall of the events. (Picture)

*First/Then Visuals* work best with children who have difficulty understanding cause and effect or who need information presented in smaller segments. The structure for first/then visuals shows when the child finishes an activity they can move on to the next task. These visual schedules are often simpler than the schedules described, as they only contain two or three items. Choice schedules have the first item and then choices for the then. For example, first the child must take out the trash, then the child can choose to play a video game, read a book, or go to the park. This allows students to gain understanding in cause and effect and consequences of decisions and learn to make their own choices. It is also the beginning stages for developing self-determination and self-advocacy skills. When making a choice schedule, it is important all of the options provided are appropriate and attainable at the time the first activity is finished.

## **Materials**

Now, that you know the different types of visual schedules and how they can be used, here are some materials commonly used in making them. All of the materials described below can be used with any of types of visual schedules. As with choosing the appropriate type of visual schedule, careful consideration must be given when selecting the type of materials to use with your child.

*Real Objects* provide a concrete representation of a task or activity. They can be as simple as a calculator to represent math homework or a toothbrush to show it is time to brush teeth.

*Photographs* have the benefit of providing a visual of the specific task or place the activity will occur. When a real object cannot be used or when a child no longer needs the concrete object, photographs can be the next logical step. One of the benefits of photographs is the children could see themselves or people they know participating in the activities.

*Drawings and Pictures* are less concrete than photographs and requires the child to use different skills. Children need to be able to understand the message a drawing or picture is trying to communicate. “Stick figures are often easily understood by an individual with autism or Asperger Syndrome” (Savner & Myles, 2000, p. 24).

*Words* can be used to supplement pictures and objects. Using written words in visual schedules supports the development of literacy skills. Text has the added benefit of being understood by people in the community where as pictures alone might be difficult for others to translate. When developing a visual schedule, it is important to think about reading level, age, and developmental level. Using words helps children to fit in with their same-age peers.

## **Conclusion**

Visual schedules can be created in several different ways to meet the individual needs of the child. They support communication, behavior, and socialization, three areas in which deaf children with autism struggle. The next article in the series will discuss using social stories to continue supporting their development.

## **References**

Savner, J. & Myles, B. (2000). *Making Visual Supports Working in the Home and Community: Strategies for Individuals with Autism and Asperger Syndrome*. Autism Asperger Publish Company: Shawnee Mission, Kansas.