Visual supports

The National Autistic Society

Information sheet

Introduction

Visual supports can be used to help people with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD). They are adaptable, portable and can be used in most situations.

We see and use visual prompts every day, for example road signs, maps and shopping lists. They help us to function, to understand the world around us, and provide us with valuable information.

Many people with an ASD are thought to be visual learners, so presenting information in a visual way can help to encourage and support people's communication, language development and ability to process information. It can also promote independence, build confidence and raise self-esteem.

> "I think in pictures. Words are like a second language to me…when somebody speaks to me, his words are instantly translated into pictures… One of the most profound mysteries of autism has been the remarkable ability of most autistic people to excel at visual spatial skills while performing so poorly at verbal skills." (Grandin, 1995. p19)

All people with an ASD can potentially benefit from using visual support, regardless of their age or ability. It's an opportunity to communicate without complications.

General information about visual supports

Whichever visual support you decide to use, make sure it's appropriate to the person with an ASD and in line with their needs and current stage of development. Visual supports are very personal and what works for one person may not work for another. Once you choose a type of visual representation (for example, line drawings), use it consistently so that the person with an ASD becomes used to it.

Your autism charity

The National Autistic Society produces information sheets on a wide variety of topics. The Autism Helpline has advisors available to talk through a variety of issues in depth.

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Introduce visual supports gradually: it is best to start off with one symbol and then build up a collection. You may find that it's best to use more than one type of visual support (see below) which again, should be introduced gradually.

Types of visual support

- Real objects
- Tactile symbols/objects of reference, for example swimming trunks, packaging, food labels*
- Photographs
- Miniatures of real objects
- Coloured pictures
- Line drawings
- Written words.

*Remember that some people with an ASD have difficulties generalising and may only focus on a particular detail. For example they may not realise that a Hula Hoop packet symbolises **all** crisps.

Presentation

Here are some ways in which you can present visual supports – depending on the preference of the person using them.

- Vertical or horizontal – both are effective. However, it has been suggested that vertical presentation of symbols can be more effective because people tend to naturally work downwards, treating information like a list.
- Schedule – a row of symbols that illustrates a whole day of activities.
- Single symbol – placed in a pocket or on an object, a symbol can act as an immediate source of communication.
- Laminate – laminating visual supports makes them more durable.
- Board – symbols are often attached to boards so that people know where to go to look at them.
- Velcro – Velcro strips can attach symbols to a board. This allows schedules and activities to be altered easily, possibly with activities being removed once completed.
- In a folder – so that visual supports are always available, put them in a folder that the person can carry with them.

Over time the way in which you present visual supports might change. You might also use different types and sizes of symbol – it depends on what suits the person using them.

You can use visual supports:

- in prominent places at eye level
- on an actual object
- throughout particular environments, eg objects and areas in the classroom and at home could be labelled.

Visual supports can be used by families, friends and professionals, who can all help by:

- being involved in producing visual aids
- using visual supports consistently
- using a visual timetable that shows what they'll be doing, when
- being creative, for example in the way that they present visual supports. If a person likes rockets, a visual timetable could be made in the shape of a rocket, to help capture the person's interest

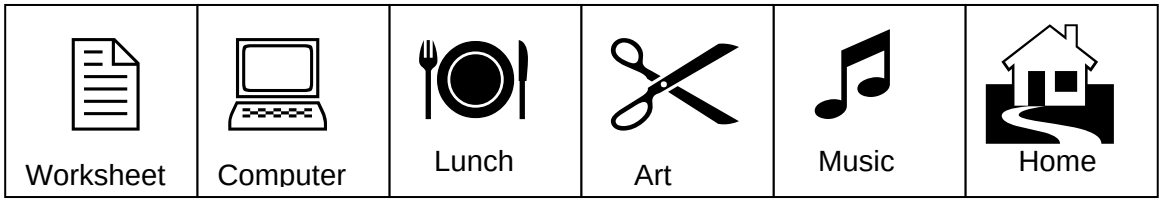
- keeping a 'mood chart' to illustrate their feelings.

Areas where the use of visual support may help people with an ASD

- Timetables/schedules
- Helping with sequencing
- Transition and change
- Starting and finishing activities
- Introduction of new activities or situations – general knowledge, curriculum subjects, news
- Instructions/reminders
- Choice
- Understanding emotions and expressions
- Sharing information
- Behaviour – praise, demonstrate what's appropriate, stop inappropriate behaviour
- Behaviour strategies
- Social skills
- Locating people and places
- Safety
- Structuring the environment
- Independent living skills
- Sex education
- Health.

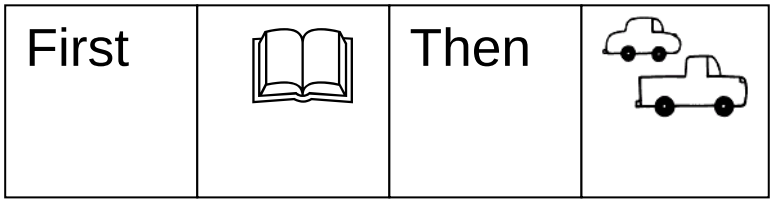
Timetables/schedules – daily, weekly, monthly

Timetables and schedules are a good way of helping to create structure and routine, which take away uncertainty and help to make daily life more predictable for people with an ASD. When producing a timetable or schedule, it can be a good idea to place an activity that someone enjoys doing after a work-based activity.



Helping with sequencing: first - then

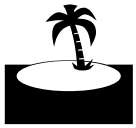
Sequencing is important to people with an ASD. It may help to relieve anxiety and reassure them about what is going to happen next.



Transition and change

Many people with an ASD dislike change and rely on routine. Visual supports can be a good way of introducing change, helping during periods of transition and, perhaps, helping people to become more open to the idea of change. Situations where visual supports could be useful include:

- moving between different work activities
- moving from playtime to lesson time
- going on holiday (see calendar below – days are ticked off as they pass so that the person can see how close they are getting to going on holiday).



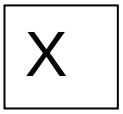
January

Monday		6✓	13✓	20	27
Tuesday		7✓	14✓	21	28
Wednesday	1✓	8✓	15✓	22	29
Thursday	2✓	9✓	16	23	30
Friday	3✓	10✓	17	24	31
Saturday	4✓	11✓	18	**25 ✈ Holiday**	
Sunday	5✓	12✓	19	26	

Starting and finishing activities

It is important for people with an ASD to know when an activity or event starts and finishes, particularly when it finishes. Without this knowledge, it may be difficult and confusing for people to move on to another activity. Here are some ideas on ways to show an activity has ended (or when it will end).

A stop or finish sign



A cross

A finish box, envelope or folder

Cover up the symbol with a blank square

Finish Write ‘finish’

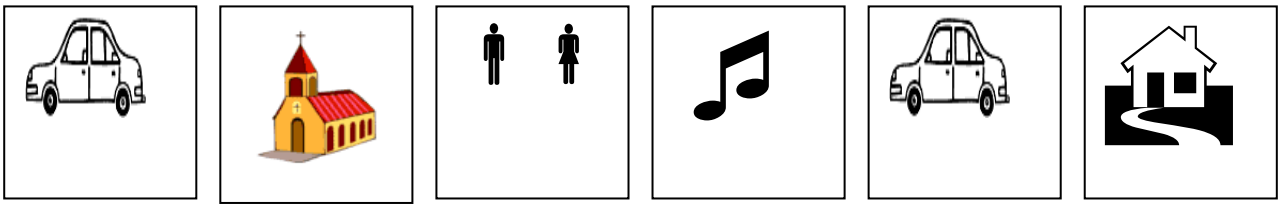
2:30 Clock face or digital time

A symbol of a timer

Introducing new activities or situations

Explaining a new activity or situation visually can help a person to understand what will happen, and hopefully reduce anxiety.

An example could be going to a wedding.



General knowledge

In daily life, we regularly use our general knowledge of familiar places and objects. So we intuitively know where to go to, for example, find milk for our coffee (the fridge in the kitchen) or buy a newspaper (the local shop). Visual supports can help some people with an ASD to carry out daily tasks more easily or effectively. You might have a picture of a place; or a series of pictures which illustrates how the person will get to that place and what they'll do once they reach it.

Curriculum subjects

For students, all curriculum subjects can be illustrated with a variety of visual supports. For example:

- literacy – objects of reference can be used to help a person to understand the content of a new reading book
- science – symbols can be used to indicate and clarify what the teacher wants you to do in an experiment
- geography – maps can help people to locate the areas being discussed in the lesson.

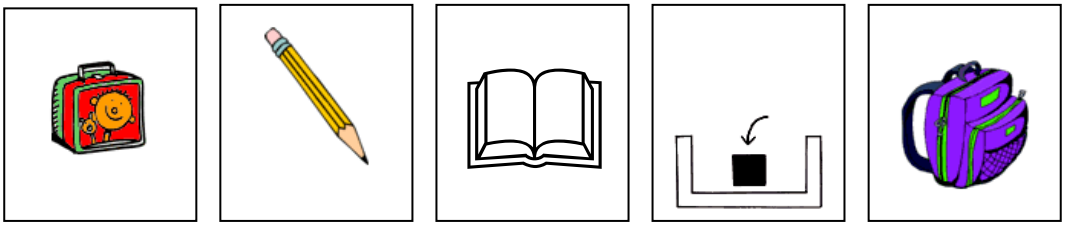
News

You can make new stories more digestible by using visual supports. This may help people to gain an understanding of current affairs and feel a bit more involved with what's going on in the world.

Instructions and reminders

Write out simple instructions – backed up by visual supports – to remind people of the steps they need to follow to complete a task. The tasks that you illustrate could include different aspects of personal care, such as washing, going to the loo, hair brushing, and getting dressed.

However, instructions (or 'reminder strips') can be used in lots more situations. For example:

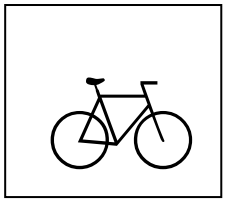


My lunchbox pencil book go in my school bag.

Choice

Get people with an ASD involved in making decisions – and help them to become more independent – by getting them to choose what food to eat, what activities they would like to do, what to wear and how to travel. Visual supports can help people to choose. Initially, limit the choices to just two or three. This will avoid unnecessary confusion and anxiety.

Would you like to travel by…



Bike

Train

Understanding emotions and expressions

People with an ASD don't always find it easy to express their emotions, or tell people how they're feeling. Visual (or written) supports can help with this. You will be able to better understand how the person is feeling at different times of day or in different situations.

Basic written scale

On a scale of 1 to 10, 1=very happy/relaxed; 10=very unhappy/anxious

Registration – 4
English – 6
Maths – 2
Lunch – 8
Science – 5
Art – 8
Home – 3

Basic visual symbols

good

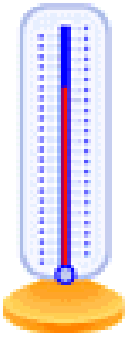
bad

okay

Ask a person to put a symbol next to each activity they take part in. This will help you to understand parts of the day that are good and bad.

Thermometer symbol

A thermometer symbol is also a common way of 'measuring' emotions. If the temperature is quite low, the person is happier and more relaxed. An increase in temperature indicates that the person is becoming less happy, or anxious.



Sharing information

It is often difficult to gather information from people with an ASD. Visual supports can help people with an ASD to share information and talk about their experiences. You might use a number of symbol cards, or have one large card with lots of choices (eg activities, people, animals, transport), on which people can circle or tick specific activities or symbols. Some titles for cards could be:

- What did you do today?
- What did you see?
- How did you get there?
- Who did you go with?

Behaviour

Visual supports can be very useful in relation to all areas of behaviour. They can help to establish boundaries and rules, or to give praise. Here are some examples of how visual supports can be used in this context.

Praise

Good

Listening

Demonstrate appropriate behaviour

When the teacher talks I must be quiet, look and listen.

Stop inappropriate behaviour

do not

hit

Behaviour strategies

Difficulties in communication can on occasions result in negative behaviours. It is also difficult to get a message across verbally when you are upset, anxious and/or confused. Visual behaviour strategies could provide the individual with an alternative method of communicating at different levels of behaviour. By removing all the 'grey areas' at a vulnerable time it can help to simplify a message and reduce anxiety. See the following examples.

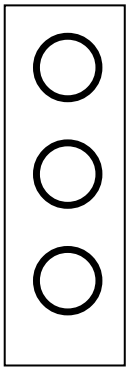
Traffic lights

This system uses both visual and written instructions to indicate the type of behaviour and actions that need to be taken.

Red I have blown!
I need to find a space where I am safe

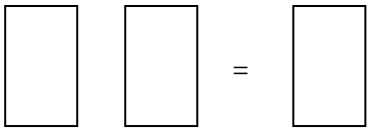
Amber I need to find a person to talk to and ask for help
Hands down (ie, I will put my hands down if I flap them, as a coping method)
Methods – headphones, find a quiet space, stress balls

Green I am okay



It can be useful to incorporate a person's special interest in their visual behaviour supports.
For example, use a picture of the special interest to divert a person from getting upset: 'When I start to get stressed I will look at pictures of my special interest and take deep breaths'.

Football card system



2 x yellow cards = red card

The football card method can be used in two ways. People with an ASD can use the cards to indicate when they are struggling. Alternatively, a carer or professional can use the cards to indicate when behaviour is not appropriate.

Reward charts

Reward charts are an excellent way of demonstrating how well someone is doing, and reminding them that they're working towards a reward.

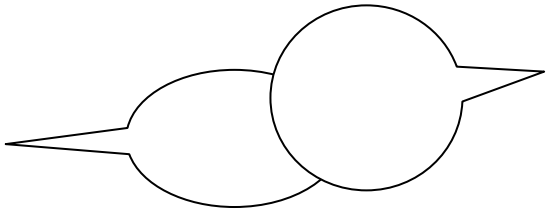
	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
AM	⊙	⊙		⊙	⊙		
PM	⊙		⊙	⊙			

⊙x10 = 30 minutes extra + listening 👂 to your music♫

Social skills

Illustrating the 'rules' of social interaction can help a person with an ASD to understand the concept. A basic example is below.

I must not interrupt



In addition, visual supports can be used to help illustrate a conversation or review an incident. See the section 'Comic strip conversations' on page XX for more information.

Locating people and places

People with an ASD can find it difficult to 'place' their family and friends when they are not with them. Using symbols, photos, and maps can be reassuring. Here are some examples.

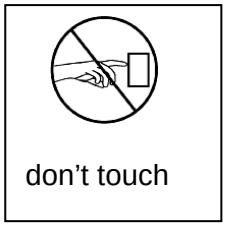
- My mum is at work [picture of mum at work]. I will see her at …….
- My friend Bethany lives here [photo of Bethany's house].
- I go swimming on Thursdays with my brother [photo of swimming pool].
- My new school is in Edinburgh [map of Scotland with a coloured mark where Edinburgh and the school are].

Safety

Many people with an ASD have a limited sense of danger and may not predict, or understand, the consequences of their actions. It is important to make them aware of potential dangers at home and in other places, such as schools or offices. Here are some ways you can do this.

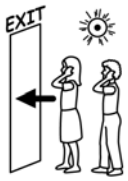
Single symbols

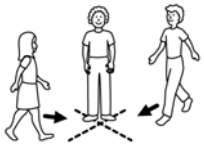
Have a single symbol on or near an object, eg cookers or electrical sockets. This symbol could just be a colour (red); a symbol; or some simple words, such as 'No touch', 'Hot', or 'No entry, Ben'.



A sequence of symbols

Fire safety

If you hear a fire alarm leave the building 

and go to a safe meeting place  wait until you are told it is safe to go into the building by a fireman .

Structuring the environment – classroom, home, work

You can take simple steps in all environments to help people with an ASD to orientate themselves and carry out day-to-day tasks with a greater level of understanding. For example:

- label objects and work trays clearly
- place visual markers on floors or other surfaces to 'map out' specific areas. Use pictures or real objects, eg spoon=kitchen; book=library
- use different textures or colours. For example, a white tablecloth on a table could mean it's dinner time; whereas a blue tablecloth could mean it's time for colouring or model making
- at school, put mats on the floor to indicate that it's circle time/story time
- keep visible lists of class or house rules and reminders.

Independent living skills

Visual supports can be used to promote independent living skills and encourage people with an ASD to carry out household tasks alone.

When I go to the shops

I need to buy

banana

milk

potato

eggs

I must remember to take money to pay for the food and drinks

Sex education

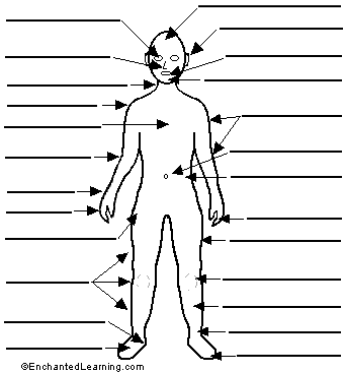
Sex education is a very sensitive and complex area and it is essential that people with an ASD are given as much information as possible. Visual supports can help to create a greater understanding. For example:

- use a body map (see the example we have used in the 'Health' section on page XX) to indicate areas where changes may take place
- use real objects to indicate appropriate clothing – bra, underwear, etc
- have a list or pictures of places where people may touch themselves – it's important to connect this to a list of when it is appropriate to do so, ie in private, but not on public transport. Our information sheet *Sex education and children and young people with an ASD*, available at www.autism.org.uk/a-z has more information
- use coloured circles to indicate some appropriate behaviour, for example holding hands, hugging or kissing certain people is OK.

Health

It is sometimes difficult to know whether a person with an ASD is unwell or hurt. Using visual supports people may be able to indicate an area of their body that hurts, or describe the pain. See example below.

Where do you hurt?



Summary

The key ways visual supports may help:

- they provide structure and routine
- they encourage independence
- they help to reduce anxiety
- they improve people's understanding
- they offer people opportunities to interact with others.

Approaches that use visual supports

Picture Exchange Communication System (PECs)

This approach is widely used, often alongside behaviour-based interventions. PECS encourages a person to communicate their needs, wants and desires by exchanging a picture card for a desired item or activity. In time, the type and number of picture cards used by the person increases.

Makaton

Makaton uses a combination of gestures, signs and symbols to help people with learning difficulties and communication impairments to communicate.

Social stories

Introduced by Carol Gray in the early 1990s, social stories are short (written) descriptions of a particular situation, event or activity, which include specific information about what to expect in that situation and why. They can provide a person with an ASD with some idea of how others might behave in a particular situation. They can also introduce a new social skill. Social stories can be strengthened by using visual supports, such as symbols or illustrations.

Comic strip conversations

Also developed by Carol Gray, comic strip conversations are a way for people to exchange information and express themselves during a conversation. Colour, symbols, drawings and written words are used, alongside speech, to help people understand the ideas and emotions being expressed. Comic strip conversations can also help people to understand past incidents or conversations.

TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication Handicapped CHildren)

TEACCH is widely used in specialist education services – and also in adult services. Fundamentally, TEACCH focuses on altering the environment and using visual supports (timetables and schedules) to help provide structure, reduce stress and improve understanding. The ultimate aim is to increase people's independence.

> "It is an approach which can help pupils with autism access the curriculum. It does this by focussing on visual rather than verbal input and by providing a visually structured framework to help organise themselves, to know what to expect, to learn, and to learn to work independently." Hull *et al* (1996, p. 152)

Contacts

Sources for symbols/pictures

There are lots of basic symbols in Microsoft Word. Go to 'Insert', then 'Symbol'. Webdings has the most. Here are some examples:

Widgit Software Ltd
26 Queen Street
Cubbington
Leamington Spa
Warwickshire CV32 7NA

Tel: 01926 333 680
Fax: 01936 885 293
Email: sales@widigt.com
support@widgit.com
Website: www.widgit.com

Pyramid Educational Consultants UK Ltd
First Floor
Queens Park Villa
30 West Drive
Brighton
BN2 0QW
Tel: 01273 609555
Fax: 01273 609556
Email: pyramiduk@pecs.com
Web: www.pecs.com

Makaton
31 Firwood Drive
Camberley
Surrey GU15 3QD

Tel: 01276 61390
Website: www.makaton.org

Websites for symbols and pictures

- www.do2learn.com - a useful website which has printable blank schedules and picture cards.
- www.symbolworld.org/
- www.enchantedlearning.com/Dictionary.html
- www.pdictionary.com/
- http://trainland.tripod.com/pecs.htm
- www.usevisualstrategies.com/pixtl.htm
- www.ace-centre.org.uk/html/resources/symbols/res02.html

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- ✷✷Hull, A., Andrews, C., and Sanderson, N. (1994). 'Classroom management through the use of the TEACCH programme'. In Shattock, P. and Linfoot G. (eds.) *Autism on the agenda: papers from the National Autistic Society Conference 1994*. London: National Autistic Society, pp.151-154
- ✷Savner, J. L. and Smith Myles, B. (2000). *Making visual supports work in the home and community: strategies for individuals with autism and Asperger syndrome*. Shawnee Mission, Kansas: Autism Asperger Publishing Company

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I understand that if this declaration is false the copy supplied to me by you will be an infringing copy and that I shall be liable for infringement of copyright as if I had made the copy myself.

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Address:
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Postcode: …….. **Tel No:** ……

I enclose a cheque/P.O. made payable to The National Autistic Society, to the value of £……..
for …… **articles at a cost of £3 per article.** *(Note to Finance: please charge to budget code:* CPA/INF/INF00*)*
Or charge my Visa/Master Card/ Switch/ Amex/ Diners the sum of £……..Switch issue no.:……

Expiry date: …… / …… **Valid from:** ……/…… **Card No.: . . . . . .**

3-digit security code, (last 3 digits above your signature on reverse of card): . . . . . .

Signature: …… **Date:** ……..
* This must be the personal signature of the person making the request

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