

Guide to Visual Support for Early Years Practitioners

Visual support makes life predictable, understandable and positive. For children with Speech, Language or Communication Needs (SLCN) predictability and clarity is essential. Knowing what is going to happen next can reduce stress and lead to calmer and more co-operative behaviour, as well as help children understand how to do something.

Many children will find that having visual support available makes it easier for them to process what is happening. Having visual support available is much better than words alone – once you've said them, they have gone, but with a visual support the message is there much more permanently. Even children with seemingly very good language who have autism will find it easier to have language supplemented with visual support.

Who benefits from visual support?

Children with...

- **Attention and listening difficulties:** Children with attention and listening difficulties often struggle to take on board the language which is used in the setting. Using visual support can prompt and remind them what is being expected of them.
- **Speech sound difficulties:** Some children with very severe speech sound difficulties may find it hard to communicate some of their basic needs and choices. Having some visual support available can make it easier for them to get their message across in a less stressful way for you and for them.
- **Receptive language difficulties:** Children who struggle to understand language really benefit from visual support. It supplements the language that is being used and is much more permanent than a verbal instruction, which disappears as soon as it is said.
- **Selective mutism or reluctant talkers:** Some children find talking in the setting difficult to do, even to the point where it is considered to be a phobia. Careful use of visual support can take the pressure off the child to talk, especially where choices need to be made.
- **Social communication difficulties and autism:** Children with autism and social communication difficulties are thought to be visual learners, so presenting information in a

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visual way can help to encourage and support communication, language development and the ability to process information. It can also build confidence and raise self-esteem.

So they benefit all children! We all find visual support useful - road signs, maps and shopping lists are all types of visual support. In the classroom you can use visual support to remind children of behaviour rules, familiar sequences and to help them know what is happening during the day.

What can I use visual support for?

There is a whole range of uses for visual support, as well as different ways they can be presented. Here are a few ideas...

- **Visual support for understanding routine and transitions**

Using visual support is a more permanent way of helping children grasp the structure of their day, whether it is a visual timetable of the whole day, or just the current and next activity.

- **Traffic lights**

These can be used to help the child understand that an activity is coming to an end soon. Whilst they are doing an activity, you show the green light, when it is a few minutes from the end, you show the amber light and as it finishes you show the red light.

- **I am working with...**

These cards are useful when staffing is a little inconsistent as it helps the child know who they are going to be working with. Having this in place so the child is familiar with it can be very helpful when there is an unexpected change to who they will be working with.

- **Egg timers**

These are useful for transitions between activities. You can get sand timers or use electronic ones which you can set for different lengths of time. They show the child how long they have left on an activity.

- **First / then cards**

- You can call this 'now...next' or 'first...then' cards.
- You can use photos/pictures for a paper chart or use boxes with the objects in them.
- Stick pictures of activities on to the chart using blue tac or Velcro.
- Use visual support such as a timer if you need to limit the time of activities.

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- Explain to the child what you need to do such as saying "First colouring and then cars"
- When the first activity is finished, then take the picture off the chart or remove the first basket saying "Colouring is finished. Now cars"

Template for making your own 'first... then' cards:

First	Then
	

Visual timetables

What is a visual timetable?

- Visual timetables are created using photographs or symbols of activities during the child's day. They are used to help children understand what they are doing over a period of time. They give structure and can help to reduce anxiety levels.
- They can be beneficial for all children, but are particularly useful for children with language processing difficulties, attention difficulties, memory difficulties, children who are learning English as an additional language and those with Autism or social communication difficulties.
- It can show a whole day or to help make clear the order of events for a certain activity e.g. getting ready for PE or going to the toilet.

How do I make a visual timetable?

- Take photographs of activities or use a symbol programme (e.g 'Boardmaker' or 'In Print') to create your pictures. Websites such as Twinkl (www.twinkl.co.uk) have ready-made symbols available for free.
- Make sure that the children understand the pictures you are going to use and what they represent.

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- Laminate the pictures and use Velcro/ adhesive to attach them to a strip on the wall/ on the table. This will help by making it easy to move the pictures around and change activities.
- Have a finished box/envelope to place the picture card into once it has been completed.

What kind of activities do I make pictures for?

The pictures will depend on the use of the visual timetable. For a timetable of the whole day, you could use pictures for events such as:

Story time
Circle time
Lunch time

You could be more specific and create pictures of the activities that will be available:

Choosing time
Phonics
Carpet time
Home time

How do I use a visual timetable?

- Display the symbols either from left to right in the correct order. Left being the first activity and right being the last activity. This aids left to right sequencing
- Always have the written word displayed beneath each picture, this ensures all adults use the same description for that picture to prevent the children being confused e.g. a child with Autism may not understand that 'break' is the same as 'play time' etc.
- Refer to the timetable as often as you can throughout the day and display the timetable in a place where the children can clearly see it.
- Show the whole timetable at the start of the day, then point to the relevant picture before you start each activity and when moving to a new one.
- Use a 'finished' bag/box/envelope, so when an activity is finished you show the children the picture, remove it from the timetable and put it in the 'finished' box.

- If you have a particularly busy day it may be overwhelming to display the full day to the children, instead display part of the day e.g. up to lunch time and then after lunch display what the children will do until they go home.

Visual support for making choices

Children may find it difficult to make choices as there is often too much choice, or they can't quite imagine what the different choices may mean. By simplifying choice making, children can make choices more easily, giving them independence and some level of control over their environment and the activities they are involved in.

Choice boards

You can use these for a vast array of choices as they support the child to know what the different choices are and give a clear structure for making choices

Using Choice Boards

- Choice boards can be used for a wide range of activities.
- You can use photos, symbols or pictures to represent choices.
- Stick the photos/symbols pictures of activities on to the chart using blue tac or velcro.
- Start with quite structured activities such as snack time where you support the child to make a choice

What to do:

- Show the choice board to the child
- Try not to ask "What do you want?" but wait for the child to make a choice on their own
- If you need to, help them to remove the photo/symbol from the board and pass it to you
- As soon as you have been passed the picture, you then say "You want...apple, banana etc and give the child their choice

Other ideas: activity choices, clothes choices, action choices, song choices ...

"I want...": another type of choice board where the child gives you the picture of the item they want.

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Visual support for social rules and routines

Normally developing children are able to pick up social rules and routines with very little support – learning how to take turns, sit quietly on the carpet, use the right tone of voice etc with minimal prompting. For children with SLCN, and particularly autism, they will find this a lot harder to pick up and may need very specific teaching of social rules and routines.

- **Good sitting prompts**

These resources can be useful for all children. You can use them as a whole class approach and have them available to refer to, or you can make them into a smaller visual prompt which you can carry around with you and have more easily accessible to help an individual child.

- **Noise-o-meter**

For some children, knowing how loudly they should be talking is difficult. You can use these to show the child what volume they should be speaking at. You can find these on Twinkl (www.twinkl.co.uk) and on TES (www.tes.co.uk) or get creative and make them yourself.

- **Checklists and visual schedules**

When children struggle to recall a list of instructions, it can be useful to have them in visual form as well. This means children can complete simple tasks with less supervision, to help give them independence.

Visual support to motivate

Some children do not simply do an activity because it makes the adult happy, or because of the praise they will get for doing it. You may need to use activities or toys that motivate them so that you can 'negotiate' them doing a less motivating activity for a more motivating activity.

- **Traffic lights**

These can also be used to motivate a child to an activity which they enjoy less. Use the traffic light system to count down the time left for them doing an activity that they don't like, making it clear that once they have finished, they can have an activity they do like.

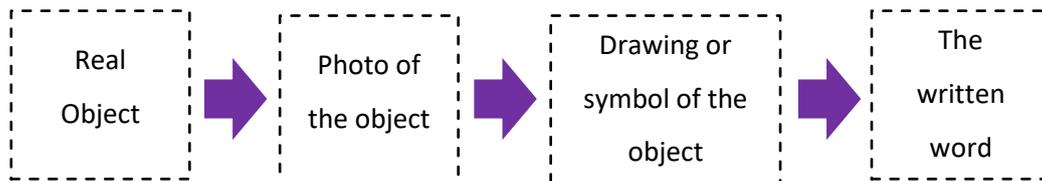
- **I am working for...**

Use these to help a child work towards 'earning' time on an activity that they choose. For every token they earn, they are a little closer to getting some time on their favourite activity.

- **First / then**
See above for information about these resources.
- **Egg timers**
These can be used to motivate children to finish an activity that they do not enjoy, with the promise of a more motivating activity once the time has run out.
- **Reward charts**
As with any other child, these are used to help a child achieve an activity that they find less motivating them as they move their way towards their reward.

Things to consider when making or finding visual support

- Some children might find drawings hard to understand. Children go through the following stages of understanding with objects and pictures. You may need to go back a step if the child you are supporting doesn't seem to understand the pictures you are using.



- **Keep language simple:** Even when you are using visual support, it is important to keep your language at a level that the child can understand. Use gesture and stress key words that the child needs to hear to understand. Try and use similar language each time you use the visual support, and make sure that all staff are using the same words when they talk with the child.
- **Consistency is key:** as a team, think about how you will use the visual support to support the child. It is no use half the staff using it and the other half ignoring it. For it to be really effective it has to be used consistently.
- **Persevere:** it might not work straight away. Sometimes children will take a while to understand how the visual support works, but once they are familiar with it, they are likely to find it invaluable for understanding their day in nursery.

Where can I get pictures like these?

Take photos of the objects and activities in your setting, as these may make more sense to the child than a more abstract drawing. You can find lots of ready-made resources online:

- twinkl.co.uk
- askability.org.uk
- symbolworld.org
- visualaidsforlearning.com
- do2learn.com
- tes.co.uk

You can also get commercially available symbol packages which are useful if you are going to be making a lot of visual supports for your setting:

- Boardmaker
- Matrix Maker
- In Print