

Visual supports

A visual support system is a visual cue that can be used to support an individual's understanding of a situation, routine, or process. They can also be used to support an individual's opportunity to express themselves.

Why use a visual support system?

We all use and benefit from visual supports throughout our day-to-day life, whether we realise this or not. Diaries, road signs, washing instructions and maps are all forms of visual supports. Using visual supports can help support understanding and expression.

There are several different support systems that can be used to do this. Education staff, Speech and Language Therapists and Occupational Therapists can help make recommendations on which system is best for an individual to use.

Diagnostic criteria

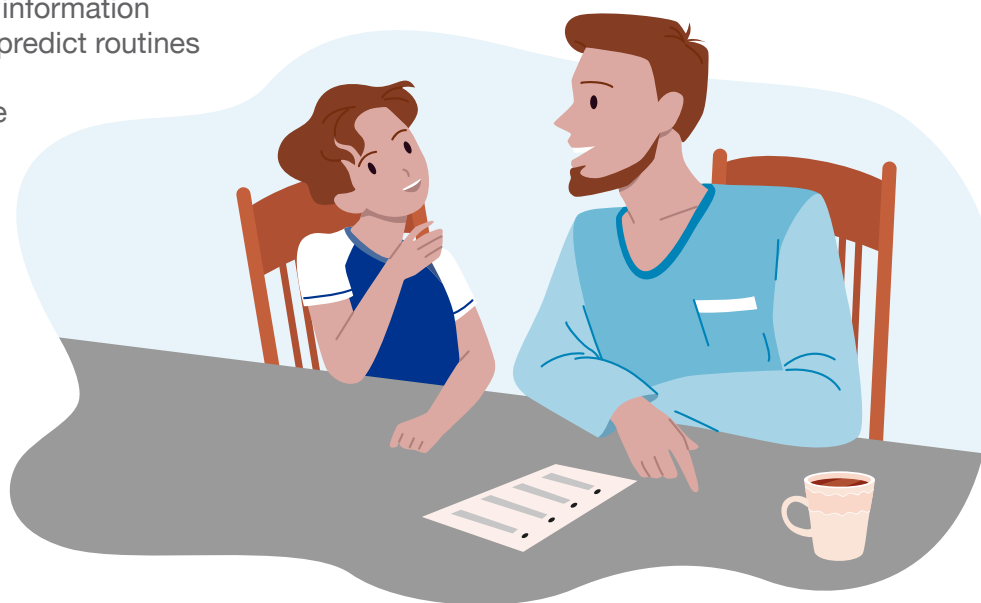
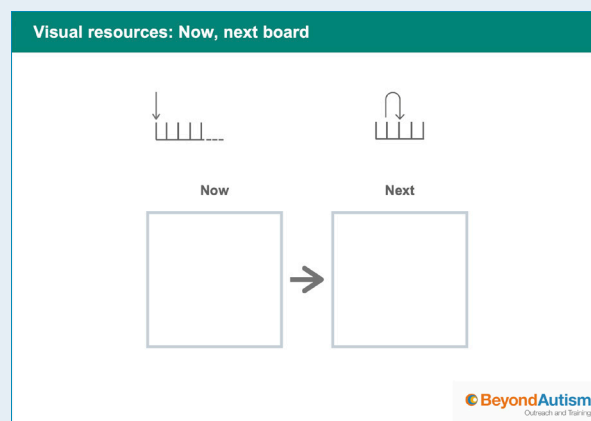
Supporting understanding

A visual support system can help to:

- Understand and retain information
- Follow, sequence and predict routines
- Reduce anxiety
- Increase independence

Now-next or first-then board:

Place a picture or symbol of an activity on a board to show what is happening 'now' and then another picture or symbol next to it to show what will happen 'next'. For example, 'now wash hands, next snack'. If your child is keen for lunch and reluctant to wash hands this can help them to understand that lunch is coming, but that there is a step that comes first. It will also help with prediction of routine and understanding of what they are being asked to do.



Visual timetable:

This works in the same way as a 'Now-Next', but with a longer sequence of symbols. This may show a morning routine, or a day at school etc. It is important that your child can understand the concept of a 'Now-Next' board before moving onto a visual timetable, otherwise this could be an overwhelming amount of information for them.

My morning

9.00
Play indoors



10.00
Garden



11.00
Drawing



12.00
Lunch time



Task management/activity schedule:

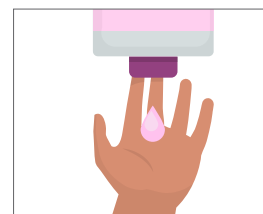
This is like a visual timetable but is used to breakdown a task, for example, all the steps involved in getting dressed, using the toilet, packing a school bag.

Washing hands

Turn tap on



Put soap
on hands



Wash hands



Rinse hands



Dry hands



It is important, that when using all these methods, that you take each picture off once the step is complete, to show progression and that the activity is finished. (You may want to use a 'finished' box to cement the fact the task is complete).

Supporting expression

Visual supports can also be used to support expression, as objects, symbols or pictures can be used by an individual to communicate needs (see our **AAC** factsheet).

They can also be used to reinforce words your child is learning as they will see the visual support as you say the word, which can help cement language over time.

Types of visual support systems

- **Objects of reference:** Use objects that relate to an action, location, or person to symbolise them when showing an individual 'what's next'. For example, pointing to and holding a plate for snack, or keys for going in the car.
- **Photos/pictures:** Photos or pictures of items, places or people can be used in visual support systems.
- **Symbols:** If your child has symbolic understanding, they may use symbols on their visual systems rather than photos. This can include simple line drawings or stick men. You can also use symbol writing programmes, for example Widgit or Boardmaker. (Some public libraries offer access to these programmes).
- **Words:** If your child can read and understand the words, they may prefer words to pictures.
- **Gestures and Makaton:** start with signing key words to your child to give visual cues to language. (Makaton is a way of communicating through the combined use of signs, symbols, and speech).

Top tips when using visual supports

- **Consistency:** If everyone approaches and uses your child's visual support system in the same way it will increase their understanding of the system. Set up a few copies of your child's visual support systems for other family members, school/nursery, and any others that your child has regular contact with.
- **Model:** Showing how to use the system and engaging in it yourself will help your child learn how to use it and get the most from it.
- **Repeat:** You need to keep using it for it to become part of everyday life and to ensure that your child learns how to use it. It may take a while for them to understand what the system means.