

30 Reasons to Use and to Keep Using a Visual Schedule

or

"Please Don't Take Away My Visual Schedule!"

1. We all like to have an idea of what is going to happen in our day. Children with autism miss most of the language and social/behavioural cues that help the rest of us understand what is happening. *Autistic children can become anxious, resistant and may misbehave* simply because they have no way to anticipate the events that come upon them each day. Visual schedules quickly inform the child about the day's expectations.
2. Some children with autism very obviously have difficulty with receptive and expressive language. It is clear to us that these children need visual supports as a supplement to verbal communication. Other autistic children *appear* to have good or even excellent receptive and expressive language skills. However, even the apparently capable child with autism can have difficulties understanding language for the following reasons:
 - The child may have slow processing time, which interferes with his ability to really "take in" verbal instructions. Much of what is said may be missed.
 - Children with autism may often be dealing with sensory malfunctioning, the sensory system may be either over or under-functioning. A hyperfunctioning system can make sensations almost unbearable that would otherwise be ordinary, and make it almost impossible for the child to attend to what is being said. When a system is hypofunctioning, a youngster may be preoccupied by a need to create sensation or stimulation. (The functioning of the sensory system can vary from day to day.)
 - Children with autism are almost always highly stressed by their lack of understanding of the social milieu in which they must function. The child may be so overwhelmed with attempting to deal with social events and expectations, that he or she may entirely miss language-based input. (Stress can even be brought on by the experience of being physically close to other children.)
 - The child is least likely to process verbal information when he or she is upset, worried or angry.
 - Children with autism often have poor sleep patterns. Their sleep may be brief or interrupted, and they will therefore often be too tired to be attentive.
 - Children with autism do not understand the pragmatics of communication. Gestures, vocal intonation, facial expressions, conversational pauses and emphases are lost on these children.

- Children with autism tend to take words literally. What they hear is not mediated by an intrinsic understanding of the social situation, nor by an understanding of the personality and intent of the speaker. In attempting to understand something that has just been said, even the bright child may miss other parts of the communication.
3. Visual schedules are tangible and non-transitory; language is fleeting. A child may not have heard what the teacher said, but still has the schedule for reference.
 4. Once the child has a visual schedule, his or her behaviour will settle. *Thus, a schedule does not make the child appear to be different; it helps him appear to be more the same.*
 5. Visual schedules *provide independence* by removing the need for the student to ask others (particularly adults) about what schoolwork has to be done. The fact that the student functions more independently ("normally") *can increase his or her acceptance by other students.*
 6. Many children with autism have a poor *sense of time* and have difficulty understanding the vocabulary of time and order (e.g. *before, after, then, yesterday, first, second*). These words are used daily however as the schedule is set up. Thus, use of *schedules teaches time and time concepts and vocabulary directly, routinely and systematically.*
 7. Many children with autism have attentional difficulties. *Visual schedules are a support to the inattentive or ill-focused child.*
 8. The use of visual schedules *capitalizes on the visual learning/memory strength* that most autistic children have. The child will often remember what s/he has seen on the schedule, although what they have been told may have been forgotten.
 9. The use of visual schedules is one support strategy that can *provide the organization, structure and predictability* that are so essential to autistic individuals. When they lack such supports, autistic individuals find the world to be highly unpredictable and confusing.
 10. Visual schedules *teach the importance of organization* in a day. The child who learns to prepare a visual schedule is developing a habit that will promote good organizational methods throughout life.
 11. Visual schedules *minimize the need to write* as the daily agenda is being established; printing and writing are often difficult for children who have autism.
 12. Preparing the schedule daily *gives the child a sense of some autonomy and control* of his daily events in a world of confusing demands.
 13. Because they provide a means for the child to anticipate upcoming events, visual schedules help to *ease the student through transitions*. Thus, they are a means of reducing rigid behaviour. In fact, *they promote flexible behaviour.*

14. Visual schedules provide a means by which adults can systematically *introduce the element of change into a student's day*. Individuals with autism need to learn to deal with change (see #13).
15. Visual schedules *increase on-task behaviour* and therefore increase Academic Learning Time.
16. The alternating pattern of choice and work items within the visual schedule in effect teaches the child that there *are some required tasks* within the day that are *followed by more preferred activities*. This "delayed gratification" is widely expected in our society, especially in work settings.
17. Visual schedules serve as a reminder to a child that a preferred activity is only one or two steps away after completion of a non-preferred task. Thus, *the schedule helps the child to learn patience and persistence*.
18. When a student learns to remove icons from his schedule to indicate task completion, he is able to see his daily progress. This visual representation of accomplishment helps to *build a sense of success* and thus to improve self-esteem.
19. Visual schedules remove the necessity of having an adult verbally direct the student to each upcoming event. The student is thus gaining independence and autonomy, and the lack of direct adult verbal direction *removes from the situation, what might otherwise become an opportunity for verbal argument or negotiation*.
20. Many Asperger's children, helped in their young years by the use of visual schedule will later be able to transfer their understanding of agendas to computerized dayplanner systems.
21. Visual schedules provide a means for a child to schedule breaks and relaxing activities on his own initiative as he learns to be aware of his own needs and body signals. In other words, the schedule becomes a way for the child to learn to be *proactive in managing his own behaviour*.
22. The use of the visual schedule can be extended to *teach the child long-range planning formats* for multi-stage or multi-task assignments.
23. Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders often have difficulty sequencing ideas and procedures. The visual schedule *demonstrates sequencing and promotes an understanding of it* on a daily basis.
24. Visual schedules can *cue recollection* of belongings that need to be assembled for home time, and tasks that need to be completed before, or at home time.
25. Research indicates that *visual schedules and supports are one of the most effective interventions* for the autistic child. They are certainly one of the most easily implemented.

26. Research has demonstrated that visual systems of communication support actually *promote the development of oral communication* in non-verbal children. This evidence can serve to reassure those who fear that such systems will inhibit language development in those whose language is delayed. (The use of visual systems will not *guarantee* the development of language in the non-verbal child.)
27. Once the student knows how the visual schedule works, he or she will be less dependent upon consistency of staffing in order to function. *Teachers or support people can be absent and the day won't "fall apart" for the student.*
28. As the child gains independence in using his visual schedule, his *instructional assistant also gains independence*. This "found time" can be used to prepare instructional and support materials and to make careful observations and notes regarding student successes and difficulties (particularly in the important area of social functioning) which will later assist in determining new instructional goals and learning outcomes.
29. *"A picture is worth a thousand words."* A picture certainly *conveys a message quickly*, it's an *instant read*, taking less time to deal with than even ten words of text.
30. Picture schedules work so effectively that you will want to *offer their advantages to other students* in the class who do not have the diagnosis in the Autism Spectrum, but who also could use help in learning to plan and organize their day and themselves.