



Visual Communication

Many individuals with Autism are thought to be visual learners, so presenting information in a visual way can help support and encourage their understanding of instructions and information they receive. In everyday life we all use visual prompts whether they are shopping lists, road signs/markings or notes that have been jotted down.

With a little bit of thought and creativity we are able to use these visuals to the advantage of the individual with Autism. A few simple things that need to be kept in mind when using visuals are to make sure they are:

- Appropriate for the individual and are in line with their current stage of development.
- Cater them to the individual, what might work for one person may not work for the next.
- Be consistent with the use of visuals and the style you choose.
- Introduce visual supports slowly, building up the collection.

Types of visual support and their presentation

Visual supports can come in many different formats below are a few examples:

- Real life objects
- Photographs
- Pictures
- Line drawings
- Written words

How you present these to the individual will depend greatly on their personal preference, you may wish to Velcro them to a board (useful if they need to be swapped or used for a routine i.e. timetable) or on a key chain so they are readily available (useful to support conversation or show how the individual is feeling or if they need anything).

Visual supports can be used to support and develop conversation with an individual with Autism using the PECS system. The system relies on the exchange of pictures to develop language and social skills, more information can be found on their website (www.pecs-unitedkingdom.com/)

Makaton is also another widely used tool to aid communication it uses a combination of gestures, signs and symbols to help aid communication with those who find this difficult (www.makaton.org.uk)



Social Stories

Social stories are short stories designed to introduce an individual to a social situation/activity and explain the expectations of the situation. They provide the individual with a basic knowledge of the situation and how they should react, which individuals with Autism may struggle to grasp and understand.

Social stories can be used to explain everyday situations such as road safety, behaviour at school or one off events such as a birthday party, wedding or special event.

Social stories can be adapted for all ages and abilities and be solely pictures, symbols, words or a combination of them based on the individual.


Tips on Using Social Stories

- Present the story to the person at a time when everyone is feeling calm and relaxed
- Be honest and straight forward when introducing the story
- Start by reading the story once or twice a day roughly a week before the situation (if you are able)
- Slowly phase out the social story once the individual begins to understand the expectations, but don't forget you can always go back to it if he/she begins to struggle again.
- Only try to use one story at a time to maximise learning
- Involving school, family and friends with sharing the social story will also increase the chances of the individual learning.

Examples of social stories

Writing a social story isn't as hard as you might think, it should primarily outline the situation, the expected behaviour and the praise at the end. Below are a couple of examples of social stories that you may use. Although each story and how it is presented will be reliant on the individual child.

"Playing games"

I like to play games with other kids. 

Sometimes I get to go first. Sometimes I don't. I know other children also like a turn going first. 

Sometimes I play a game and don't even get a turn. That makes me feel angry but myself "I'll get a turn another time". I take a deep breath and sit quietly. 

Sometimes when I play games I win. That makes me feel happy. 

Sometimes I lose. I say to myself "Oh well. I hope I win another time".

I take a deep breath and sit quietly. 

Then I say "well played" to the winner and smile. I think of all the times I have won before. I say to myself "all kids like to win and everyone gets a turn to win".

Other children like playing games with me because I'm such a good sport. 

I like feeling calm after I have played a game. 





Visual Timetables

Individuals with Autism like structure and routine; it helps prepare them for what is to come and helps them to keep their anxiety levels to a minimum. Time tables can be used for planning out a day i.e. school days with lessons and break times to small activities such as dressing one's self or going to the toilet.

Time tables that are supported by visuals have a much higher success rate as the individual with Autism is able to understand them easier.

Creating a visual time tables

There are several ways to put a visual timetable together, if you are constructing one to follow a set activity you will just need a series of images with a simple instruction next to it and encourage the user to follow the sequence:



Another version of a timetable would be to outline the events for a day, so for example a day at school may look like:



Tips on Using a Visual Timetable

- Keep it simple and introduce it slowly
- Display it in a predominate place at eye level for the intended user
- As the individual gets used to the stages you can begin to phase out the timetable but can always return to it if needed
- Share with others who have a responsibility to your child i.e. school/carers to make sure an approach is consistent
- Make it appropriate and relatable to the person, aim at a special interest to get full attention



Now & Then

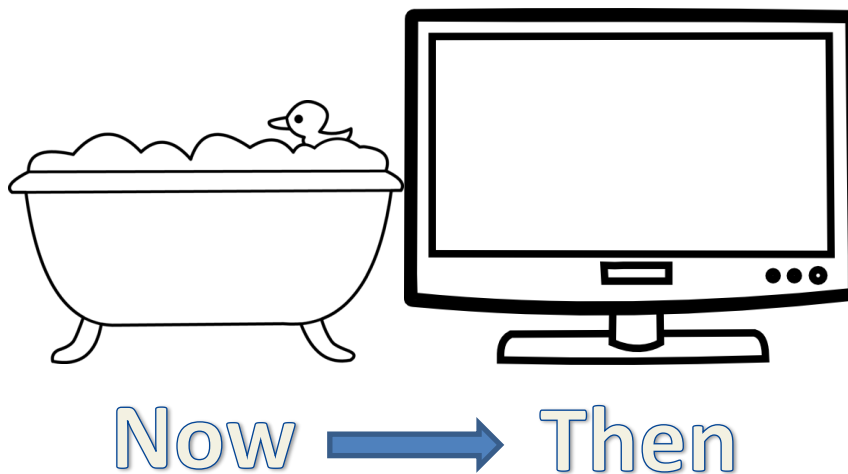
People with Autism like order and sequencing, using a Now and Then board can give them this reassurance while allowing them to understand sequencing and the need to carry out and finish a task before beginning a new one.

Using Now and Then Boards

Now and then boards are very simple to use and can be done either verbally, visually or a combination of both. It relies on saying simple statements and giving firm instructions. For Example:

“Now Bath time, Then Cartoons.”

Using this simple statement gives the individual with Autism a set of unambiguous instructions but also shows them there is something after the current task. The statement above can also be expressed using visuals for example:



Tips on using Now and Then Boards

- If the first task isn't a chosen one for the child such as homework/bath make sure it is followed by a more motivational one i.e. Special interest.
- Can be used for transition between task as well as motivational
- Can be used in school to help transition between lessons.
- When using the Now and Then Board ensure you use the individuals name to get their attention before delivering the instructions



Visual Timers

Time is a very abstract concept for individuals with Autism to understand, by using visual timers we are able to help them understand durations of time, how much time is left and of course when a period of time has passed.

Visual timers can be used for a variety of reason:

- **Transitions-** gives the individual a visual cue as to when the current task is finished and they need to move onto the next one
- **Staying on task-** helps the individual to focus on the task at hand; some timers can also help with sequencing actions of a task, i.e. showering or washing.
- **Tolerating-** if a child dislikes a task, i.e. brushing teeth it gives them reassurance that the task will end and then they can move on
- **Time Outs-** allow the child to visually see how much time they have left of a consequence also gives them something to focus on, use of liquid timers can provide a therapeutic approach to time outs allowing the individual to calm down
- **Special Interest-** limiting the time an individual is focusing on a special interest

Types of Visual timers

There are many different types of timers that you can use and depending on the individual they may respond better to one or two different ones depending on the situation or task being timed, below are just a few types of timer available

- **Mobile phone Apps-** this may be helpful if the individual is responsive to technology
- **Time timers-** show a physical amount of time that can be consistent i.e. egg timers/sand timers
- **Liquid Timers-**these timers don't allow you to specify a time but are very therapeutic so are ideal to use in a sensory room or during time out where the individual needs to calm down or used at bed time.

Tips for using Timers

- State what you are using the timer for and what will happen when it runs out
- Be persistent in their use and encourage the individual to use them as well
- Use them on main tasks and not for everything or the individual may become too reliant on them.
- Begin to phase them out when the individual gets used to how much time they can spend on a task, but don't worry about returning to them if needed.



Quiet /Time Out

Imagine having a flash light shone in your eyes, headphones on blasting out heavy metal music, pins and needles all over your body and being asked to do a simple task in a completely foreign language. Your stress levels would be sky high; this is typically how a person with Autism will feel on a daily basis.

By using quiet time out an individual is able to take themselves or be shown to a safe area where they are able to calm themselves down before continuing on. The idea is to allow them to reduce anxiety levels by being in a familiar place with less sensory input to help them process and manage their emotions.

Tips on creating and using a Quiet Area

Each Quiet area will be catered to the individual but here are several things which should be consistent to ensure it works as effectively as possible:

- Make sure it is somewhere where there is as minimal noise as possible
- Out of the way i.e. not in a main walkway, like the stairs or in the kitchen where there is a lot of traffic
- Agreed and designed by the individual
- The understanding that this area is for the individual with Autism to feel safe and secure and that nobody else should enter/use it
- When you notice anxiety/anger levels are raising in the individual encourage them to use the safe place explaining that it is there for them to help calm them down and when they are there they are safe.

Ideas for setting up a quiet space

There is no need to buy large expensive tents or sensory rooms for a quiet space; it just needs to be somewhere safe and consistent for your child to access. Below are some ideas to creating your own quiet space:

- In a corner of a quiet room, where some books/toys are available along with a pillow and blanket/duvet
- Under a table where a cloth/bedsheet can be draped over to create a safe space
- Even the child's own bedroom, where they have access to their own things, a simple rule about the door being closed means that no one can enter

These can be used in all settings to help reduce anxiety or anger, all you must do is agree on a location for the individual to use when they need to.



Sensory Environments

Many people with autism have sensory sensitivity. This can affect one or more of the five senses sight, sound, smell, touch and taste. An individual's senses can be over-developed (hypersensitive) or under-developed (hyposensitive). Both can have an impact on how people experience, and cope with, different environments.

Due to this sensory sensitivity over the course of a day an individual with Autism will struggle to process all the sensory input they receive, sensory environments allow the individual to experience sensory levels which are appropriate to them in order to help them develop their sensory understanding and also allow them to control their emotions and stress levels.

When used appropriately sensory rooms:

- Create a safe space
- Facilitate a therapeutic approach
- Provide an area for the engagement in de-escalation and crisis prevention
- Promote and teach self-care and emotion regulation skills

Types of Sensory Environment

A sensory environment may not necessarily have to be a room, the world is sensory environment and with some modification you can use it to help meet the individual's needs.

The original design is a dark room in which is filled with multi-sensory equipment such as fibre optic lights, laser machines, stereos to play music among a variety of other interactive toys and equipment. Of course these can cost a considerable amount of money to set up, but the same thing can be achieved in any room:

- Turn off any bright lights, dimmer switches are perfect
- Turn down any loud noises, if you are able to play quiet soothing music even better.
- Make sure there is a comfortable area where the individual can sit/lay.
- Then find things for them to interact with, i.e. a torch with coloured tissue paper over the lens/a rattle or just something soft they can stroke or rub against themselves.

Sensory environments don't need to be limited to indoors, a sensory garden is ideal for an individual who likes to go outside and explore. You could try:

- Having a small water feature which they can interact with
- A herb garden which they can smell and taste
- Soft and hard areas in the garden
- Concentrating on the types of wildlife

Just a small corner of the garden can provide a rich sensory environment for an individual to explore, learn about their senses and the world around them.



Sensory Boxes

Many individuals with Autism have difficulty understanding and integrating with the sensory world, they may be Hyper or Hypo sensitive to sensory input, for example they may not experience high levels of pain or things may taste/smell different. A sensory box can help them make sense of the world around them while developing practical skills as well as aiding emotional and language development.

Sensory boxes are simple enough to make and don't have to be expensive, there are many household items that can be incorporated. They can be used by all ages and are also great for not only people on the Autistic Spectrum but for also allowing younger children to develop their understanding of the sensory world.

Ideas of things to include

The first thing you will need is a box; an old shoe box or plastic tub is ideal, you can then leave this, plain or cover it in wrapping paper or glitter, get the individual who is going to use it to help design it, it will allow them to take ownership of the sensory box.

All that's left to do then is fill it with a variety of objects, here are some ideas:

- Fill it with rice/pasta/ sand which can be scooped, poured or played with.
- Fill a jam jar or empty bottle with water, a little oil and glitter to create a glitter lava lamp
- Hard and soft objects, such as sea shells or feather creating a variety of textures
- A homemade shaker, empty bottles or yoghurt pots with rice/lentils in
- A torch with coloured tissue paper on the end or a shape cut out of card to create shaped lights
- Sponges with aromatic essential oils on them, (Lavender for a calming effect is always a good choice)

These are just some ideas for sensory boxes that you can make yourself; other ideas may be to have several boxes filled with different objects, for example a dry box with dried rice and a wet box with water for use outside. A personal sensory box and one that can be used to introduce and develop play with other children.

You are able to get pre made sensory boxes but these can be expensive. The internet is full of ideas and it is useful to see what the individual likes and enjoys before spending large amounts of money on items.



Useful Links

A **Social Story™** describes a situation, skill, or concept in terms of relevant social cues, perspectives, and common responses in a specifically defined style and format. The goal of a Social Story™ is to share accurate social information in a patient and reassuring manner that is easily understood by its audience.

<http://www.carolgraysocialstories.com/social-stories>

The **NAS (National Autistic Society)** have guidance and information about the structure, content and implementation to write social stories.

<http://www.autism.org.uk/living-with-autism/strategies-and-approaches/social-stories-and-comic-strips/how-to-write.aspx>

Inclusive Communication Essex (ICE) is an Essex-wide training package that teaches the families and carers of adults with learning disabilities how to use a variety of different forms of communication. This helps those with learning disabilities to understand and be understood, and become fully involved in their life plans by taking their communication needs into account. <http://www.essexice.co.uk/>

Do2learn provides thousands of free pages with social skills, activities, guidance, learning songs and games, communication cards, academic material and transition guides for employment and life skills

<http://www.do2learn.com/>

SymbolWorld is a website created by Widget Software specifically for symbol users. It has material for all ages and includes news, personal contributions, stories and learning materials.

<http://symbolworld.org/>

The Handwriting Page Maker allows you to create pages of text to assist on the development of children's handwriting skills.

<http://www.members.thebigbus.com/resources/writing/index.htm>

The Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) is described by its authors as 'A unique AAC training package developed for use with the young child with Autism and other Social Communication Difficulties'. To find out more about PECS - <http://www.communicationmatters.org.uk/page/pecs>

Google Images have pictures available to use for a variety of strategies.

<https://www.google.com/imghp>

Total Sensory design & manufacture sensory equipment & install or refurbish full sensory rooms. Also produce custom made safety padding to prevent injury.

<http://www.totalsensory.co.uk/shop/index.php>

SensoryPlus is a division of The Kirton Healthcare Group and is one of the UK's leading sensory equipment providers from single catalogue items through to entire environments.

<http://www.sensoryplus.co.uk/>

Commotion Distribution sells high quality innovative educational products wholesale to school suppliers all over the world. We are delighted to showcase our full range which is designed to stimulate learning & enhance teaching.

<http://www.commotiondistribution.com/>

Fledglings are a national charity that finds and sells products that improve the lives of disabled children and their families. <http://www.fledglings.org.uk/>

SpaceKraft develop and manufacture a full range of sensory products that provide genuine solutions for carers and teachers who face the difficult challenges of special needs people.

<http://www.spacekraft.co.uk/shops/sk/Default.aspx>