

# WHY USE VISUAL SUPPORTS?

## PEOPLE ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM TYPICALLY HAVE:

- ⇒ **Trouble processing language.** This means that even if they use lots of language, it may be hard for them to make sense of instructions that they hear.
- ⇒ **Difficulty with initiation.** It can be hard for autistic kids to get started on a new activity.
- ⇒ **Trouble seeing the steps of a process.** When a child can't see how to break a large activity down into smaller steps, it can feel stressful or impossible.
- ⇒ **Difficulty seeing when something is finished.** Sometimes this leads to kids not wanting to start the activity. Sometimes it means they keep going too long.
- ⇒ **Difficulty changing routines once formed.** If they don't understand the instructions or have a different idea about what to do, this can be hard to change without clear visual instructions.



# TYPES OF VISUAL SUPPORTS

## A Schedule Should:

- ⇒ Tell you where to go and when
- ⇒ Provide a big picture of your day
- ⇒ Help you see planned and last minute changes

## A To-Do List Should:

- ⇒ Show what you have to do
- ⇒ Show that you're making progress (check off, mark off, move to finished)
- ⇒ Tell you what to do next (e.g. check schedule, read independently, ask mom / teacher what to do next)

## Instructions Should:

- ⇒ Tell you what to do in a way you can understand
- ⇒ Help you see how to start, what the steps are, and when the activity will be finished
- ⇒ Help you see the main point without getting distracted by the materials

# TYPES OF VISUAL SUPPORTS

My **schedule** says it's play time, my **to-do list** says shape sorter and puzzle, and my **instructions** show me where to put the pieces.



My **schedule** says it's math time, my **to-do list** says pages 22-23, and my **instructions** say to solve for  $x$ .



# TEACHING KIDS ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM TO USE VISUALS

- ⇒ Teach them to look at the visuals to see what to do rather than teaching them to wait for you to tell them what to do. For instance, point to the schedule rather than saying “lunch time!”
- ⇒ When you are first teaching, give as much help and guidance as necessary so that they are very quickly successful.
- ⇒ Once they understand how to use the activities, prompt less and less so that they begin to use them independently.
- ⇒ Don’t use more language than you have to. This promotes independence and helps you get your point across more clearly.
- ⇒ Show any changes visually on the schedule or to-do list. Don’t sneak changes when the child isn’t looking. This helps them trust the visuals and teaches flexibility.
- ⇒ If possible, teach the child to ask for what they need (e.g “I have trouble breaking activities down into steps. Can you help me write down what I need to do?”)
- ⇒ Help the child use the visuals in a variety of settings with a variety of different materials.

# PROMPTING FOR KIDS ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

- ⇒ It's best to minimize language when prompting to help the child focus on the activity. Use clear, direct language paired with gestures such as pointing.
- ⇒ Starting with a demonstration of a new activity can help a child see the instructions.
- ⇒ Handing the child an object from the activity (their pencil, a ball, etc.) may help them initiate the task.
- ⇒ Avoid moving a child's hands for them. This generally does not help them learn to initiate and execute the task. It also may encroach on a child's right to autonomy. The exception to this is if a child is learning a new motor task and clearly gives permission (verbally or non-verbally) for physical assistance.
- ⇒ If you are using visuals, help the child identify and make sense of the visual rather than just giving them the information. For instance, point to the instructions or the correct place on their schedule and help them read or interpret it, rather than simply telling them the instructions.

# PROMPTING FOR KIDS ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

- ⇒ When first teaching, give the child as much support as they need to learn the task successfully. Error-free learning helps them learn to do the task correctly from the beginning
- ⇒ Once the child understands the activity, begin waiting longer before prompting, and start at the bottom of the prompt hierarchy rather than the top. This will help the child develop independence and keep the prompting from becoming a permanent part of the activity.

## Prompt Hierarchy



# TYPES OF VISUAL INSTRUCTIONS

Receptive language is a relative weakness, and visual learning is a *relative* strength for autistic kids. This doesn't mean that visual learning is especially strong, or that they will know how to use the visuals without being taught. Consider what type of visual will make sense to the child even when they are feeling stressed. It's best not to use a skill the child has not yet mastered.

- ⇒ OBJECTS: Use an actual object for your most concrete students who don't understand pictures.
- ⇒ PHOTOGRAPHS: Pictures of the activity, location, or student doing the activity are more concrete than symbolic pictures.
- ⇒ SYMBOLIC PICTURES: Before using boardmaker or clipart, make sure the student understands this type of picture.
- ⇒ WRITTEN & PICTURED: For emerging readers, pair pictures with words to take the stress and guess work out of using the visuals.
- ⇒ WRITTEN: For strong readers, simply using words is usually adequate.

# TAILORED LANGUAGE

Receptive language, or making sense of what they hear, isn't the easiest way for most kids on the autism spectrum to learn. It's best to use clear, concise language when giving instructions. You can also pair verbal instructions with gestures like pointing and demonstrations to help the child understand.

For very young kids, try simple phrases like "Put in!" or "Lunch!"

For older kids and kids with lots of language, it can still be helpful to be direct and concise when giving instructions. You may try saying something like "Please put the cars in the bin" rather than asking a question, "Can you clean up?" or otherwise being indirect, which may be confusing.



# SCAFFOLDING

Scaffolding: Providing the supports a child needs to allow them to access a learning activity.

Here is an example of teaching without scaffolding: I explained to the student how to drive a car and then gave them the keys to drive.

Here is an example of teaching with scaffolding: I took the student with me while I drove, carefully explaining what I was doing. I then took the student to a safe parking lot and gave them the opportunity to try one part of driving (using the gas and breaks) while I talked them through it. Next I modeled turning with the steering wheel, and gave them a safe and low-pressure opportunity to practice this. Over time we put the skills together, eventually moving out of the parking lot onto a safe neighborhood street.

Because autistic kids learn differently, scaffolding can help them learn many things that are difficult for them.

## WAYS TO SCAFFOLD

Scaffold the *material*.

- ⇒ Choose activities that are familiar, simple, and of interest to the child.
- ⇒ Have the child complete the easy steps, while you do the challenging steps.

Scaffold the *steps*.

- ⇒ Name each step.
- ⇒ Describe each step.
- ⇒ Model each step.



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# SCAFFOLDING

Over time, pass the job of naming, describing, and modeling from the teacher to the child. Here is an example of what this could look like:

## TRIAL ONE:

Chef: (*names the step*) "First I need to cook the macaroni."

Chef: (*describes the step*) "I'm going to fill up the measuring cup to the 3 cup line. Then I'll pour the 3 cups of water in the pot and turn the stove on to high."

Chef: (*models the step*)

## TRIAL TWO:

Student: Names the step

Chef: Describes the step & models the step

## TRIAL THREE:

Student: Names the step & describes the step

Chef: Models the step

## TRIAL 4:

Student: Names the step, describes the step, models the step

# JOINING INTO YOUR CHILD'S PLAY

## WHAT TO DO

- ⇒ Get near the child at a comfortable distance and begin to imitate what they are doing.
- ⇒ If they watch you, make a small change and do something different.
- ⇒ Go back to imitating them.

## WHAT TO SAY

- ⇒ Narrate or describe what the child is doing or what you are doing.
- ⇒ Try not to ask questions or make commands.



# INTERPRETING BEHAVIORS

When a child is struggling with challenging behaviors, it can be helpful to consider how the child's learning profile impacts the behavior. This will help you identify a set of skills to teach your child to help them be successful and get their needs met.

## SOCIAL DIFFERENCES.

Could the behavior relate to:

- ⇒ Different social skills and preferences
- ⇒ Trouble imagining the perspectives of other people and other people having trouble understanding the child's perspective
- ⇒ Difficulty using language to express thoughts and needs

## INTERESTS & ROUTINES

Could the behavior relate to:

- ⇒ A narrower and very strong set of interests
- ⇒ A need to keep routines the same once they have formed
- ⇒ Sensory sensitivities or preferences

## LEARNING PROFILE

Could the behavior relate to:

- ⇒ Trouble making sense of what they hear
- ⇒ Difficulty seeing the instructions in an activity, including how to start, what the steps are, and when it will be finished
- ⇒ Trouble understanding time
- ⇒ Difficulty shifting attention from one activity to another
- ⇒ Difficulty seeing the main point versus the details

# TEACHING SELF-CALMING TO KIDS ON THE SPECTRUM

**Step 1: ASSESS.** Offer the child a variety of calming activities to see what seems to make sense to them and help them feel good. Here are some examples:

## **DEEP BREATHING ACTIVITIES:**

- ⇒ Blowing a pinwheel
- ⇒ Blowing craft balls off the table
- ⇒ Blowing a feather
- ⇒ Blowing each finger like a birthday candle
- ⇒ Deep breathing with visuals (search “square breathing” and “figure 8 breathing”)
- ⇒ Simply taking 10 deep breaths

## **SQUEEZING ACTIVITIES:**

- ⇒ Squeezing a stress ball
- ⇒ Asking for a hug (some kids might benefit from a photograph of a hug that they can hand to a caregiver to request this activity)

## **MOVEMENT & EXERCISE:**

- ⇒ Jumping jacks
- ⇒ Push-ups on the floor or against a wall
- ⇒ Pushing against someone else's hands or against a large ball
- ⇒ Pushups sitting in a chair (push hands down next to your hips to elevate body)
- ⇒ Running up and down stairs
- ⇒ Band exercises (Pull band up over head 10 times, tie band to chair legs and press feet into band)

## **STRONG INTEREST ACTIVITIES:**

If the child has a strong interest, sometimes focusing on that interest can help a child get calm. Maybe they would like matching pictures of trains, arranging numbers, putting blocks into a tin to hear them ding, watching a visual timer, or coloring pictures of their favorite characters. Whatever it is the child likes, try turning it into a simple activity for them.

**STEP 2: TEACH.** Take several of the activities that were easy for the child to use and seemed to make them feel good. Arrange them into a visual to-do list. You can simply arrange the activities themselves so your child can see all of them, or if your child understands lists you can write out a list.

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**STEP 3: PRACTICE.** Once you've put together a calming routine, have the child practice it while they are calm.

If the child has a schedule, you can start by putting it on their schedule throughout the day. Try putting it on their schedule right before activities that may cause stress, so that they go into these difficult transitions feeling as relaxed as possible. If the child doesn't have a schedule, you can let them know, "after we do XYZ, we are going to do your relaxation."

Once the child is good at doing the routine, you can surprise them with it in the middle of an activity so they can practice doing it unexpectedly. Start by interrupting an activity when they are calm and saying, "It's time to do your relaxation" or showing them that you've added it unexpectedly to their schedule. This will help prepare them for the times you need to transition them to this routine unexpectedly because they are becoming upset, and it will keep it from feeling like a punishment.

Now that your child is used to this routine, continue to put it on their schedule before stressful activities so that they regularly practice their new skills.

**STEP 4: MORE PRACTICE.** Keep practicing the routine, and also use it before or after meltdowns. When you start to see a child become stressed or upset, calmly tell them, "Time to do your relaxation," show them the schedule card, or give them the schedule object. It's best to catch them before they escalate too far. If they are too upset to do it, wait until they calm down a bit and then try again.

The best times to practice self-calming skills are when we are just beginning to get upset and when are coming out on the other side. Most kids won't be able to use these routines right in the middle of a meltdown. If the child is very mad or upset, it's okay to simply keep them safe and wait until they are ready to do their relaxation exercise.

Make a note of what caused the meltdown, and try doing relaxation the next time that same scenario appears before they become overly stressed. For instance, if it was homework time that caused the meltdown, tomorrow try doing relaxation and then starting homework. If the child begins to become stressed, you can repeat all or part of the relaxation routine again to see if it will help them calm back down.

