

Using Visual Schedules

When we give an instruction or tell someone what is going to happen next, the words leave our mouths and then are gone in a second. What if the person whom we were speaking was not paying attention? What if they did not hear? What if the instruction was too long? What if they did not understand it? What if they were distracted by their sensory needs?

What if, in addition to saying the instruction, we also showed them a picture of what was expected of them? Our words are still gone in a second, but the picture is still there for them to see and help them remember what to do or what is next

Visual schedules:

- Take advantage of an individual's visual strengths and increases understanding
- Can be looked at over and over again to provide a reminder
- Are easier to focus on during times of emotional stress when it is more difficult to process what someone is saying to you
- Can be used to help children through difficult or non-preferred tasks by showing them that a motivating task is coming up next (eg. first math, then swing)

How to set up a visual schedule

1. Decide on a format of the schedule

- Object schedule – can be used for non-verbal children, or those with few language skills. Each object represents an activity and is handed to the child before they do the activity. For example:
 - Work with therapist - cards
 - Colouring – marker
 - Inside play – play doguh
 - Reading – book
 - Music therapist – kazoo
 - Snack – mini lunch box

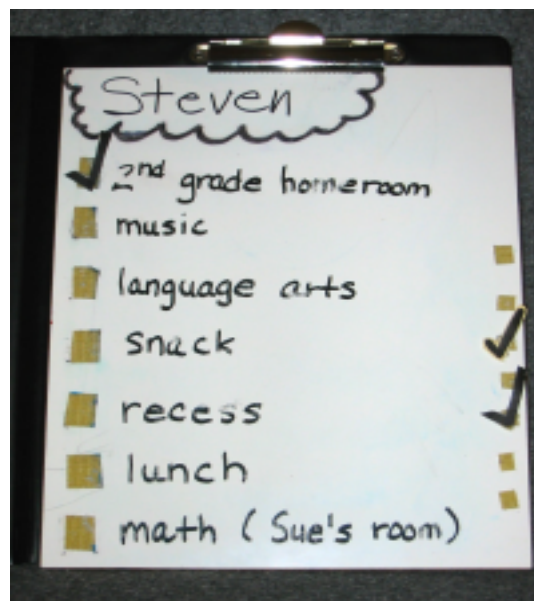


- Picture/Photo schedule – the child must be able to match a photo or picture with an activity. Some children will prefer photos and some will respond to a line drawing, you will need to decide what is best for your child.

Here is an example of a photo visual schedule. As each activity is completed it is placed in the 'all done' pocket.



- Written schedules - can be used for those who are good readers and are able to comprehend what they read. They are like 'To Do lists' where the items can be crossed off as the child completes tasks



2. Decide on the length of schedule

- This will depend on the child's needs and abilities. Some may be able to attend to a whole day's worth of activities, some will be overwhelmed by too much information and may be only able to handle two or three activities at a time



Versus



3. Decide on the cue you will use to prompt your child to look at their schedule

- It can be a gesture, or a visual. The schedule should be easy to access and the child should be able to see it. A verbal prompt such as 'Go look at your schedule' may not always be the best, especially if the child is upset and having difficulty processing what is said to them. We also don't want them to become dependent on us to remind them to use the schedule.

4. Teach Schedule use

- Like any new concept, using a schedule is something that you need to teach. For an individual with little or low verbal understanding, you can do this by placing the schedule object or picture in their hand and gently physically prompting them (from behind) to go to the desired area. It is important not to be in front of them leading them to the area as this can cause them to become overly dependent on you rather than looking at the schedule
- For individuals with more verbal skills, you can explain (briefly) the concept of schedules. You can also show them your schedule and pictures of schedules that other adults use to increase their motivation to use a schedule

- 5. Be consistent in putting down all the activities on the schedule – especially if unexpected things happen**
 - By using the schedule to show upcoming changes, you are teaching the child to become more flexible and more accepting of change because it is happening within the familiar routine of checking the schedule

- 6. Monitor how the child is doing with the schedule**
 - Once the child is using their schedule, notice whether they are independent in using it. The child is independent when they go to the schedule on their own once you hand them their visual cue to ‘check schedule’ and then use the next schedule item to go independently to the next activity

- 7. Make changes to the schedule format if needed**
 - If you have been teaching the schedule for a couple of weeks and find there is no progress in independence, this is a sign that you may need to modify the schedule. For example, reduce the number of items or change the format from pictures to objects

- 8. As your student grows and develops new skills, you may decide to change the schedule format**
 - For most individuals, the schedule format is likely to change as new skills emerge.