How to Use Visual Supports to Help Your Child with Autism

DISCLAIMER: This summary provides overall strategies you can use to help your child. For more details, it may be helpful to read the Visual Supports Tool Kit and to communicate with your child's clinician about your concerns.

Who would benefit from the Visual Support Tip Sheet?

Parents and caregivers whose child with ASD has difficulty understanding or using language. Those language difficulties can cause frustration, challenging behaviors and anxiety. A visual schedule can communicate a new or complete routine in a way to help simplify your and your child's life.

How can visual supports help?

Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) often find it difficult to understand and follow multiple steps and spoken instructions. Visuals can help caregivers communicate what they expect and provide predictability. This decreases frustration and anxiety, which may help reduce problem behaviors that result from communication difficulties.

What are visual supports?

A **visual support** refers to using a picture or other visual item to communicate with a child who has difficulty understanding or using language. Visual supports can be photographs, drawings, objects, written words or lists. Research has shown that visual supports work well as a way to communicate. We will highlight two types of visual supports below, **First-Then Boards** and **Visual Schedules.**

What is a First-Then Board?

A **First-Then Board** is a visual display of a task to be completed, followed by something your child prefers. This can be helpful in teaching children with ASD to follow directions and learn new skills.

How do I teach and use a First-Then Board?

Decide what task you want your child to complete first and place a visual of that in the **FIRST** box. Decide the preferred item or activity that your child can have immediately after the **FIRST** task is done and place that in the **THEN** box.
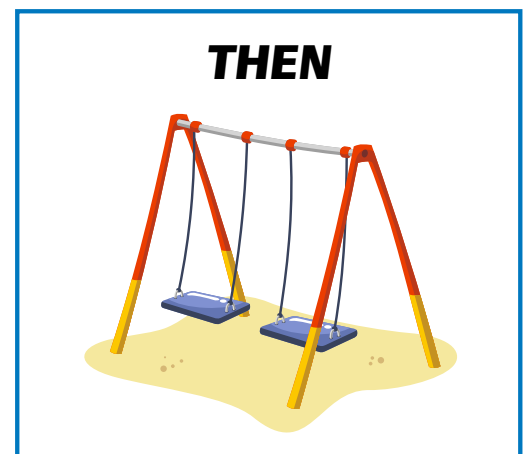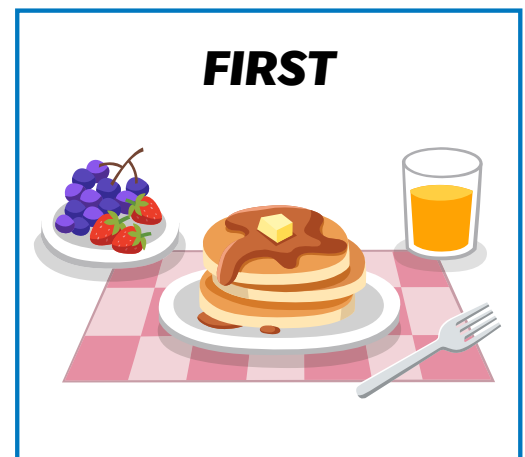
FIRST

THEN

Present the board to the child with a brief, verbal instruction. For example, before beginning the **FIRST** task, say, **FIRST**, *eat lunch,* **THEN** *swing."* If needed, refer to the board while your child is doing the task. For example, say *"You ate all your sandwich. Now eat your apple,* **THEN** *swing."*

When the **FIRST** is completed, refer back to the board. For example, say *"All done eating your lunch, now swing!"* and immediately provide the preferred, reinforcing item or activity. Otherwise, your child may not trust the board the next time you use it.

What is a Visual Schedule?

A **Visual Schedule** is a representation of what is going to happen during a period of time. It is helpful in decreasing anxiety and rigidity around transition challenges by communicating when certain activities will occur in that part of the day.

How do I teach and use a Visual Schedule?

Decide the activities that you want to include in the schedule. For example, a morning routine schedule could include: *wake up, take a bath, get dressed, eat breakfast, brush teeth, grab backpack, head to bus*.

When it is time for an activity on the schedule to occur, cue your child with a brief verbal instruction. For example, say *"check the schedule."* At first you may need to physically guide your child to check the schedule (e.g. gently guide by the shoulders and prompt your child to point to the next activity on the schedule).

When a task is complete, cue your child to check the schedule again and transition to the next activity. Provide praise for following the schedule.

Once your child has mastered the use of a **Visual Schedule**, mix unpredictability into the schedule by introducing a symbol that represents an unknown activity (e.g. "surprise activity"). Use this first during a positive activity and later add in during unexpected schedule changes.

For more information:

Visit **autismspeaks.org/tool-kit** to find our *Visual Supports Tool Kit*.

MORNING ROUTINE

Wake up

Take a Bath

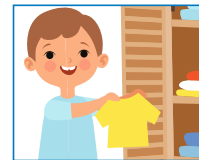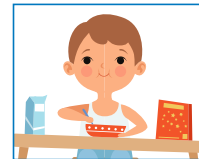**Get dressed**

Eat breakfast

Brush teeth

Grab backpack

Head to bus

Surprise activity