

## Using Visuals

All these activities and ideas promote sharing attention, turn taking and exposure to everyday and descriptive language. All are fundamental to learning and are a chance to relax and play with each other.

Using visuals cards can be a supportive way to communicate for a child with speech and language and communication needs including children with autism.

Visuals help to provide structure and routine whilst helping to build understanding and reduce anxiety. Using a simple visual routine allows a child to know what is happening and when which is particularly important for children with autism. It can be used as a positive intervention to avoid frustrations whilst encouraging some independence.

There are different kinds of visual supports and for you and your child and when introducing them it can feel a little trial and error to find which works best for you.



Visuals come in the form of:

- Objects of reference
- Photographs
- Coloured Pictures
- Black and white Symbols
- Written words
- Plain squares of card or paper with drawings

The visuals can be real objects, printed symbols or images on a smart phone or tablet or they can be drawing on a white board.

### Objects of reference

One of the first stages of introducing visuals is to use objects of reference to support routine changes or transitions.

For example you may use your child's coat to indicate it's time to go outside or show your child a banana when it's time for snack. Always use verbal language alongside visuals, keeping it simple "garden or snack time" and allow a little time for your child to process the instruction. Give this a go try counting to 10 before repeating the instruction. It may appear your child is not hearing you when all they are doing is processing what you have said.





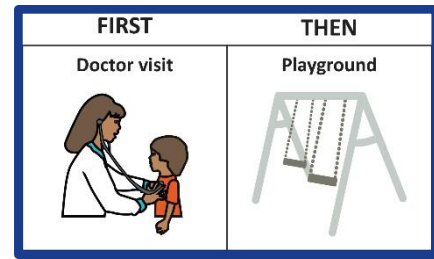
## Now and Next/First and Then

Now and Next schedules are sometimes called ‘first and then’ boards. These are broken down versions of using a schedule to develop a routine.

Simply put they indicate with pictures what is happening now and what will happen next. When using a now and next it is a good idea to use visual warnings in the form of sand timers to countdown to the transition change. If you don’t have this simply use your hand to indicate 5 minutes and then count down after every minute.

For example: Tom is playing with the cars but soon it’s time for dinner. On the ‘Now’ section draw or use a visual for **car** and on the ‘Next’ draw a **dinner plate** and knife and fork.

**Top tip** – If the dinner plate alone is not motivating enough try drawing the part of the food you know your child likes, ie pasta.



## Offering rewards

Sometimes visuals have been used to offer rewards for a task being completed. This is usually on an adult agenda a reward is used to encourage the child to complete the task. For example, the ‘now’ section might be **sorting shapes** and ‘next’ section offers a reward the **light up toy**. To use visuals in this way suggests you are using bribe to get the child to do what you want. You want the child to work on an adult agenda, but the ideal solution is for the child to **want** to do the thing we want them to do.

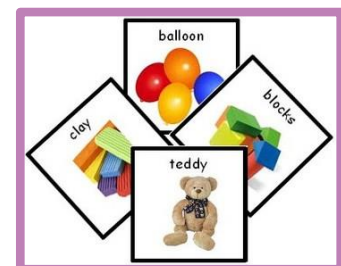
This means we need to get creative and consider whether the activity is offering the following:

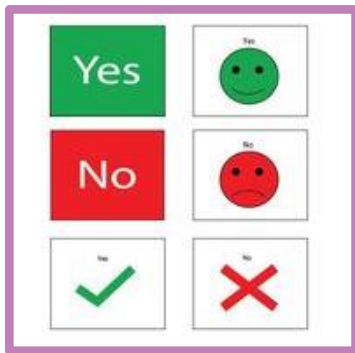


- Is it fun?
- It is adapted for their level of development?
- Is it visually engaging?
- What’s my child’s preferred learning method?  
i.e. are they a visual learner/kinaesthetic/auditory
- It is an irresistible invitation to play?
- It is motivating?

## Next steps

Once visuals are established they can be used to offer choice in activities and develop independence. You may ask your child what s/he would like to play and offer two choices of visual cards one in each hand. Any efforts your child makes to communicate their response should be affirmed whether it’s taking one card, pointing or using eye gaze.





They are also great for encouraging your child to express their opinion and emotions. You could use simple face cards to help with your child's emotional regulation or indicate when they are feeling frustrated.

Visuals can also be used to create a schedule for the day or specific routine such as toileting, or used to reinforce behaviour and prepare for transitions i.e. starting school.

### Portable

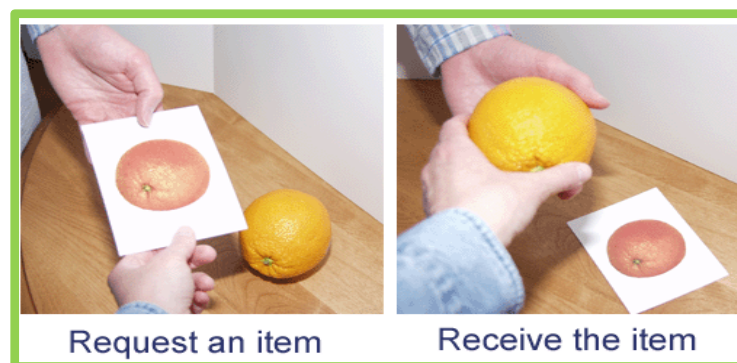
One of the benefits of using visuals is that they can be portable so you can take them out and about with you. The difficulty with printable cards sometimes is that they can get tired and worn so using a laminator helps with durability.



**Top tip** - Carry a plain small notepad and pen in your bag to draw visuals in the moment. You will not always have a printed picture that represents every scenario, but you can draw something to represent it.

### PECS

PECS is a speech and language strategy that uses visual symbols to encourage communication. In this instance the aim is for the child to independently exchange a symbol for what the child wants. There are many phases to PECS and using this strategy is a commitment and all those involved with the child to work collaboratively for it to be effective. Speech and language therapists will indicate whether your child is ready for this intervention.



Some of you may already be familiar with The Attention Autism Programme, if you would like to practise delivering a fun Bucket at home with your child then please look up **Gina Davis Attention Autism** and you will be able to watch some fantastic videos. This is a strategy widely used across the early years sector and often in older children too. It promotes the fundamentals of communication and is visually stimulating. Be brave and give it a try, we guarantee you will love it!

**Sam Smith and Angela Smith**

Early Years' Service