



An Introduction to Visual Supports

"Any visual display that supports the learner...independent of prompts. Examples of visual supports include pictures, written words, objects within the environment, arrangement of the environment or visual boundaries, schedules, maps, labels, [organisation] systems, and timelines"

Wong et al., 2014, pg.22

Visual supports provide a visual reference point that can be used as often as needed, and support the communication process. Visual supports can help people on the autism spectrum with their skill development and increase independence.

Visual supports need to be:

- Presented in a clear, uncluttered format
- Engaging and meaningful to the person using them
- Organised logically
- Reviewed frequently to ensure they are meeting the individual's needs
- Used consistently and kept on display so they can be accessed when needed
- Individualised to the autistic person's needs and comprehension level, some people may prefer print rather than object or photo symbols and vice versa
- Updated as appropriate, to stay meaningful, i.e. moving the arrow on a visual schedule

When making visual supports think about:

- Involving the young person as much as possible
- Basing the visuals on aspects of the young person's area of interest
- Consulting with the young person's parents/carers to understand what visuals might already be in use
- Matching the visuals to the young person's physical ability to use them e.g. ticking a list, moving a picture
- Carefully selecting your visual symbol or picture. The person constructing the visual needs to consider, the literal understanding of words, what is being taught and what is being focused on in a visual support
- Taking into account speech pathologist advice where possible

The type of visual support you use will depend on the young person's level of symbolic understanding. Review visual supports regularly as the individual's understanding changes. Visual supports can be made using one or more types of the visuals below.

Real object



Some young people will need real objects to understand. This is the most easily understood visual support.

Part of a real object



In this example a part of an apple is representing an apple.

Miniature of real object



In this example a toy apple is representing an apple.

Photo of real object



Ensure the photo is as clear from distractions as possible. This will support the young person to focus on the relevant details.

Abstract picture/ concept



When selecting an abstract concept, consider which picture represents your activity, lesson or task. For example, when an apple is chosen for fruit break, the young person may believe that an apple is the only choice of fruit, or always has to be eaten at fruit break.

Line drawing



If using a line drawing, which is hand drawn, consider how each person's drawing may differ. Drawings that are lost and replaced by a drawing from a different person may cause confusion for the person using them.

Printed or written word

apple

Consider the the literal understanding of words and the level of comprehension.