

Visual Schedules, Supports and Cues

Visual schedules - Most students need a visual schedule on their desk or similar.

- Done for the extent of time that the individual student can read and process i.e. Now, or This ... then ... etc. and
- With photos or symbols with text, or text only for text-literate students,
- Big enough for the individual student to see and interpret
- Bright, clear and current.

What Are Visual Schedules?

Visual schedules are a sequence of visual cues—photos, symbols, words, or objects—that represent upcoming activities or steps in a task. They help students understand routines, transitions, and expectations.

Why Use Visual Schedules? (Research Summary)

- Improved Predictability and Reduced Anxiety
- Studies show that visual schedules reduce problem behaviours by creating a predictable structure (Bryan & Gast, 2000; Dettmer et al., 2000).
- Children are more likely to engage in transitions and less likely to become distressed when using visual cues.
- Enhanced Independence
- Visual schedules promote self-management and reduce reliance on adult prompting (Spriggs et al., 2014; Meadan et al., 2011).
- They support executive functioning by making abstract time concepts concrete.

Support for Language and Comprehension:

- They provide multi-sensory reinforcement, enhancing comprehension for non-verbal or minimally verbal students (Hodgdon, 1995).
- Students with receptive language difficulties benefit from consistent visual input.
- Curriculum Access and Engagement:
- Visuals have been shown to increase student participation and task completion (Massey & Wheeler, 2000).

How-To Strategy for Teachers

1. Select the Type of Schedule

Choose based on age, cognitive level, and communication needs:

Type	Description
Object Schedule	Real objects represent activities (for early learners)
Picture Schedule	Photos or symbols (e.g., Boardmaker, Widgit)
Written Schedule	Words or sentences (for literate students)

Use a left-to-right or top-to-bottom layout, matching reading habits.

2. Create the Schedule

- Use durable materials (lamine if needed).
- Include consistent symbols or photos for each activity.
- Add “finished” envelopes, checkmarks, or Velcro strips for interaction.
- Colour-code or number activities to support sequencing.

3. Introduce and Teach the Schedule

- Explicitly teach how to use it: start with hand-over-hand prompts, then fade support.
- Model “checking the schedule” and reinforce the habit.
- Use language like:
 - “First reading, then playground.”

4. Incorporate Prompts and Cues

Prompt Type	Example	Goal
Verbal Prompt	“What’s next?” or “Check your schedule.”	Develop independence
Gestural Prompt	Point to the next activity symbol	Support non-verbal cues
Visual Prompt	Use a “STOP” or “WAIT” card during transition	Manage time or behaviour expectations
Physical Prompt	Light guidance to hand or shoulder	Only if needed, then fade

Prompt fading is key. Start with more intrusive prompts and systematically reduce them.

5. Embed in Routine

- Place schedules at eye-level in strategic locations (classroom wall, desk, lanyard).
- Review the schedule at the start of day and after transitions.
- Allow students to update, tick off, or move completed tasks to a “done” folder.

6. Differentiate for Individual Needs

- Pair visuals with audio for dual input.
- Create mini-schedules for multi-step tasks (e.g., handwashing, packing bag).
- Use individualised reinforcement (e.g., star for each completed step).

7. Evaluate and Update Regularly

- Observe student use and adjust for clarity, engagement, or changing needs.
- Collect data on engagement, independence, and behaviours.
- Ask: Is it still relevant and effective?

Additional Tips

- Use visual timers alongside schedules to support time perception.
- Combine with first-then boards for students who need simpler formats.
- Reinforce schedule-following behaviour with positive feedback or token systems.

References

- Bryan, L. C., & Gast, D. L. (2000). Teaching on-task and on-schedule behaviors to high-functioning children with autism via picture activity schedules. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*.
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- Spriggs, A. D., Gast, D. L., & Knight, V. F. (2014). Visual schedules and systematic instruction for transitioning students with autism spectrum disorders across school settings. *Preventing School Failure*.
- Hodgdon, L. (1995). *Visual Strategies for Improving Communication: Practical Supports for School and Home*.
- Meadan, H., Ostrosky, M. M., Triplett, B., Michna, A., & Fettig, A. (2011). Using visual supports with young children with autism spectrum disorder. *Young Exceptional Children*.
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How to use Visual Schedules

Step 1 - Select the type of Schedule

- Object Schedule - Real objects represent activities
- Picture Schedule - Photos or symbols
- Written Schedule - Words or sentences

Step 2 - Create the Schedule

- Include consistent symbols or photos
- Add "finished" envelopes, checkmarks, or Velcro strips for interaction.
- Colour-code or number activities

Step 3 - Introduce and Teach the Schedule

- Start with hand-over-hand prompts, then fade support.
- Model "checking the schedule" and reinforce the habit.

Step 4 - Incorporate Cues and Prompts

- Verbal Prompt - "Check your schedule."
- Gestural Prompt - Point to the next activity.
- Visual Prompt - Use card during transition.
- Physical Prompt - Hand or shoulder.

Step 5 - Embed in Routine

- Place schedules at eye-level in classroom.
- Review the schedule throughout the day.
- Allow students to update, tick off, or move completed tasks to a "done" folder.

Step 6 - Differentiate for Individual Needs

- Create mini schedules for multi-step tasks (e.g., handwashing, packing bag).
- Use individualised reinforcement (e.g., star for each completed step).

Step 7 - Evaluate and Update Regularly

- Observe student use and adjust as needed.
- Collect data on engagement, independence, and behaviours.
- Ask: Is it still relevant and effective?

What are Visual Schedules?

Visual schedules are a sequence of visual cues—photos, symbols, words, or objects—that represent upcoming activities or steps in a task. They help students understand routines, transitions, and expectations.

Why use Visual Schedules?

- Improved predictability
- Reduces anxiety
- Reduces problematic behaviours
- More likely to be engaged
- Enhanced Independence
- Builds executive functioning

Additional Tips

- Use visual timers alongside schedules to support time perception.
- Combine with first-then boards for students who need simpler formats.
- Reinforce schedule-following behaviour with positive feedback or token systems.