

# Making and using visuals

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## What are visuals?

Anything that you can look at to help you start or complete a task, help you check what you should be doing or what's going to happen next, or help you remember something important, is a visual support, or a 'visual'. Most people use multiple visual supports throughout their day – the calendar on your phone, a written to-do list, a work schedule, or a post-it note reminding you to call someone back are all visuals.

Visual supports are helpful throughout the lifespan, but because most adults know what supports work for them and are able to put them in place themselves, this resource will be focussed on using visual supports with children.

## Why are visuals important?

Visuals provide something concrete to check back on, which can be essential for children who have trouble processing or remembering spoken words. Visuals are particularly important in environments like classrooms, where there is a lot of spoken language to process, with a lot of background noise happening at the same time. Teachers also do not have time to constantly check in that a particular child has processed an important piece of information, or that they have remembered it later. Writing the information down (or for young children, using some other form of visual reminder) allows the child to process the information as something visual instead of auditory, and gives them something to check back on later.

Many autistic children also have trouble with executive functioning, which is a broad term for a range of abilities associated with organising yourself, remembering tasks and objects (like your phone and keys), starting and completing tasks, and focussing your attention. Visual supports can help take some of the executive functioning load off the child – having a list of tasks or a schedule for the day written down means that the child doesn't have to memorise it; using visuals like timers can help children to prepare themselves for transitions between tasks; and having a list or a set of pictures showing all the objects the child needs to pack before heading out the door can make mornings less stressful for everybody.

## **Social stories**

Social stories (also sometimes called 'stories for understanding') are a specific form of visual support. Often formatted as a comic strip or a sequence of captioned pictures, social stories are intended to help a child understand each step in a new routine or a special event.

Social stories can be helpful when a child's daily routine is going to change significantly (such as when a child starts school); when there will be a change in routine (like a school trip or swimming lesson instead of the usual school day); when the child or the whole family is going through a big change (such as moving house or the arrival of a new sibling); or sometimes to explain wider world events like Covid lockdowns.

Most social stories are written from the perspective of the child who will be reading them, so a social story about going to school would read, "I am going to school." This can help children to place themselves in the story, and can help them to remember what to do if they're overwhelmed or distressed. Occasionally social stories will use "we" rather than "I", if they are about something the whole class or the whole family is doing; and social stories about wider events might sometimes use "everyone" – for example, social stories about Covid lockdowns might say "Everyone is staying home from school."

## Making a good social story

A social story should cover:

- Every step in a new routine
- What to expect in a new environment (it can help to run through the 4 Ws when figuring out what to include here – what will happen, where will the child be, when will this happen/when will it be over, why is it happening)
- Where to go for help or to take a break
- How long a new activity will take
- Why the new routine, activity, etc. is happening
- Accurate images, including photos of new environments or people whenever possible.

A social story should not include:

- Direct instructions about the child's behaviour, e.g. "I will be quiet on the museum trip."
- Emotional manipulation or shaming language, e.g. "Everyone will be mad if I am too loud"
- Consequences for particular behaviour, either positive or negative, e.g. "If I am good, I will get an ice cream at the end", or "If I talk too much, I will not be allowed on my tablet"
- Metaphors or analogies – social stories should be as direct and literal as possible, to prevent children misinterpreting them.

Social stories should be used to tell children what to expect, not how to behave. They are intended to help children feel less anxious and overwhelmed about changes or new things, and they can't do that if the child is feeling pressured to behave in a certain way. If direct instructions need to be part of the social story, they should be concrete actions rather than descriptions of general behaviour – "I will get on the bus to go to school" is fine, "I will be on time and organised for the bus" is not. Wherever possible, if there is a direct instruction that you think the child may struggle with, provide an alternative or a way to help – for example, "If the bus is too loud, I can wear my headphones" or "If I don't want to go in the swimming pool, I can sit with a teacher instead."

Wherever possible, make social stories yourself. There are several reasons for this: it allows you to use photos of the actual objects, people, and environments the child will be interacting with; it ensures that the social story will be specific and accurate to the child; and it avoids using the many harmful or inappropriate examples of social stories that will pop up if you search for them online.

For more information about social stories:

<https://carolgraysocialstories.com/social-stories/>