

## How to use visual supports

by Aimée Engler

I've used a lot of visual supports for my kids over the years. Probably a fraction of them were very useful but most were a total waste of time and effort (not to mention laminating sheets). If you've been involved in the therapy scene you've probably been told that schedules are really handy, or to put pictures on the wall for the kids to follow. These charts and pictures that they're referring to actually have a name: visual supports, and believe it or not they can actually be really effective. Since I have a bit of a personal experience with visual supports I thought I'd explain what they are, how effective they can be, what situations you could possibly use them for, and when best to use them. But I'm not going to do it from a 'Let's get this kid under control!' perspective. Rather, it'll be from a 'Let's help overcome challenges so that your child can fulfil their potential and you don't feel like you're overwhelmed' point of view.

By the way, you DON'T have to be a therapist to create your own visual support or implement them. It's all part of being an intentional parent!

### What are visual supports?

There are 3 categories of visual supports:

1. *Scheduling*: calendars, diaries, etc. If you use any kind of scheduling tool at all then you're using a visual support and you probably didn't know it.
2. *Creating boundaries*: physically moving objects to achieve desired behaviour. A perfect example of this is a baby being placed in a play pen or high chair, or a mat on the floor where children sit for storytime. You might also put away or cover up toys you don't want played with; ensuring devices are outside of bedrooms so they can only be used at specific times; creating a place where shoes and bags belong, etc.
3. *Behaviour modification*: modifying specific or general behaviour through the use of a chart, picture, scale, etc.

I'm going to focus on the third type of visual support because chances are you've already got the scheduling and boundaries down pat (contact me if that's not the case and you need help) and its behaviour modification that you need help with.

### Why would we use visual supports?

Research shows that visual supports work. They are evidence-based, meaning that enough studies have consistently shown improved behaviour (whatever that might have been) as a result of the use of visual supports, indicating that they will work for the majority of kids.

But why do they work?

1. They are flexible - you can create a visual for pretty much any scenario.
2. They are adaptable - the same visual can be adapted to different settings and locations.
3. They produce generalised behaviour - this means that the desired behaviour isn't just produced in one environment but in a number.

Beyond these 3 primary reasons which studies show, I'll give 4 more than I've recognised through the use of them personally, as well as in my own research.

4. They give visual reinforcement of an aural instruction – if your child is struggling to verbally process what's being said, perhaps because they have a processing issue, they're overwhelmed, or their memory doesn't hold information for long enough, a visual can provide what's needed to overcome that barrier. You might like to think of it as, 'your voice is lost in a haze and the visual cuts through that haze and allows the instruction to find it's target'.
5. They're great for kids who are either pre-readers, learners, dyslexic, or can't think and read at the same time because instead of words you can use pictures.
6. They promote independence. This is actually what I consider one of the key features of visual supports. We don't just want to parent our children now, but also parent their future selves. What do we want our children to be like when they are teenagers or adults? Obviously this perspective must remain realistic however the aim is to promote independence, which is what visual supports do well.
7. They improve relationships: negative interactions tend to reduce when kids don't have to hear your voice AGAIN. Nagging is reduced and independence increased. You can also look out for opportunities to praise your child for what they've done right, rather than pull them up on what they didn't do/did wrong.

### **What 'behaviour modification' means (and what it doesn't)**

The type of visual support that we'll focus on, 'behaviour modification', might sound like we are trying to shove a child into a box that might be the wrong fit for them. 'Too small, wrong shape – too bad! You must fit because society says so! I need to control you more!' This is definitely not the case, and 'modification' is probably a misnomer. The role of the visual support is to support the learner to change their behaviour to:

- protect them from harming themselves and others,
- help them better understand a situation that they've found themselves in,

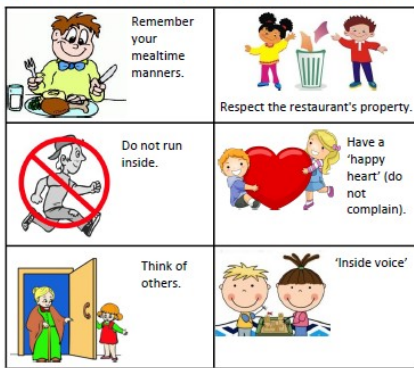
- show them societal boundaries and rules that need to be followed,
- teach their brain to perform a difficult action,
- train them in self-discipline so they can achieve their goals,
- successfully understand and express themselves emotionally,
- help them to communicate more effectively.

A visual support implemented correctly in a loving and caring environment will inevitably bring about a positive behaviour change which ultimately benefits the child, a change which the child cannot entirely produce themselves.

### Examples of visual supports

I listed above the many reasons why a visual support is implemented and as such there is no 'one size fits all' visual support. A visual support is created to fulfil a function, so it's helpful to consider what behaviour you are focussing on before determining which visual support you would use. Here are a few examples:

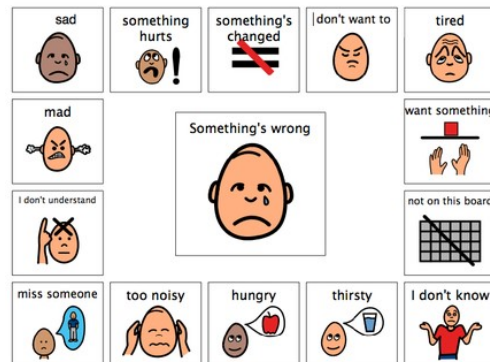
#### Manners when you eat at a restaurant

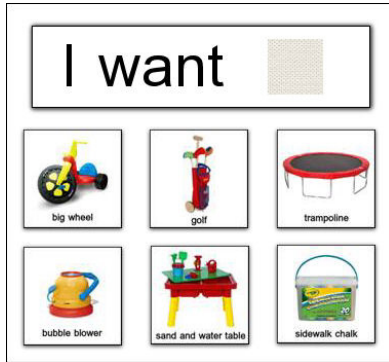


This visual support is to help a child understand and self-monitor their behaviour while at a restaurant. If there are too many on the list to work on this time, cover some of them up to make it more reasonable (we want the child to be successful!). The parent will go through the list prior to the occasion, perhaps even practising while they're at home, with them physically role playing or using toys. On the way to the restaurant they will show the child

the chart and confirm that they child understands. Have it available while at the restaurant just in case a discreet reminder is needed (but don't shove it in the kid's face!), and then review how it went on the way home – what they did well and what could improve next time.

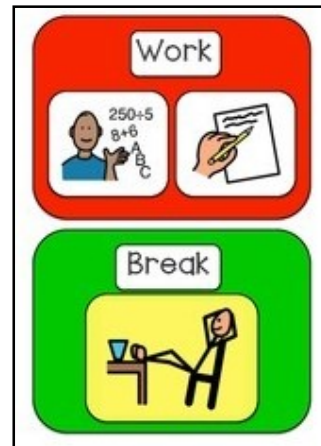
Often a child cannot express what they're feeling or what they want but need a bit of visual support. Sometimes their emotions are blocking their speech, or they have a speech issue. Having this visual support handy can help a child communicate when words fail them.





Sometimes a person’s brain needs a bit of help to connect abstract words with the physical realm. This visual support can be used either to communicate an activity a young child would like to do, or as something the child can work towards as a goal. It also helps a child connect activities with pictures to improve their ability to use words when making requests.

Parents (or teachers) can use visual supports to help children understand that work must be done before a break happens. This visually support encourages self-discipline and reinforces expectations. The cards can be separated and presented to the child individually, or kept together.



5	I AM GOING TO EXPLODE!!!
4	I AM GETTING ANGRY
3	I AM A LITTLE NERVOUS
2	FEELING OK
1	CALM AND RELAXED

This is the classic 5 point scale and a lot of teachers and therapists like it because it is so versatile and simple. While it’s often paired with emotions (especially anger), it can be used for almost any behaviour – proximity to others, volume, stress, how polite a person is being, etc. It doesn’t have to be 5 points, it doesn’t have to be these colours, it can have pictures or words or a combo. This flexibility is what makes it so popular and, if used correctly, successful.

Here is one example of a visual support for a routine. If your child has difficulty following a sequence or focussing on a task then this can be a handy reminder to create those necessary pathways in the brain and increase their independence. A parent would put this routine



up on the wall and walk the child through it step by step, pointing to it as they initially brushed their child's teeth, then perhaps having the child do a couple of the steps. Gradually the child would take over completely.

### **When a visual support will not work**

Before you go out and spend lots of time and energy and money on implementing visual supports into your house, I want you to think about the reasons behind the behaviour your child is exhibiting, because often these reasons can prevent a visual support from being effective and will merely result in a heap of wasted time, effort and money.

All behaviour is communication, so what is your child communicating?

- If your child is overwhelmed, showing them a picture that essentially tells them to 'toughen up princess' isn't going to help. They'll still be overwhelmed and you'll have only succeeded in adding on an extra level of frustration.
- If your child is incapable of being quiet but you show them a 5 point scale volume chart and expect them to comply, your child will never meet your expectations. First they need to learn *how* to adjust their volume before they can adjust it according to the chart.
- If your child is struggling to get their act together in the morning then yes, giving them a physical morning routine will help. However there might be underlying reasons as to why they're struggling that a morning routine isn't going to resolve. Perhaps their brain won't let them focus? Perhaps they're never getting enough sleep and can't function? Perhaps their sibling is constantly distracting them? Perhaps they actually don't know how to do what you're asking them to do because you didn't properly train them?

Become an expert on your child. Is there another reason why they are doing what they're doing? A visual support isn't always the first or only solution.

If your child is neurodivergent then expecting them to comply, with or without a visual support, might also be unreasonable. Obviously if the behaviour is hurting them or others (physically, emotionally, or relationally) then definitely seek to overcome or work around it. But if it's not harmful then try to resolve it in ways other than treating the child as though they have a problem that needs fixing. Perhaps the environment is actually what needs to change, not the person? If possible, try to meet half-way or find a compromise.

### **How do I create visual supports?**

1. Make them (google!).
2. Buy them (eg. Little Tick Creations has some great ones).

3. Ask someone else for theirs (eg. check out the Resources section).
4. Ask someone else such as a therapist or a good friend if they can make you some ('Pretty please?').

## What visual support do I choose?

The 2 most important things to remember when choosing a visual support is:

1. It most effectively suits the behaviour you wish to modify, and
2. It must fit your family context.

As mentioned before, not every visual support will fit every behaviour, so think carefully about what behaviour you wish to modify. Use the examples given above to help figure out the most appropriate format. Try to only focus on one behaviour at a time or it'll get confusing! If you think your child can handle more than one (eg. a 5 point scale for volume + a routine for brushing their teeth) then make sure they are in different formats and introduce them with a bit of a gap in between. And consider your family context. Some of these examples are fairly obvious however I'll note them down to give you an idea of what I mean:

- Don't use just words when the kid can't read, make sure there are pictures.
- Don't rely on technology to present it when you don't typically use tech or it will just create more issues.
- Don't use baby pictures when your child is a teenager.
- Don't use clip art when the child has a literal mind and will not understand the pictures.
- Don't rely heavily on colours if the child is colour-blind!

## How do I implement a visual support?

Don't just chuck it on the wall and expect your child to understand what it means. You'll spend time introducing it to them and explaining what it means, possibly even 'practising' it prior to officially implementing it. After this you'll place it in a logical place where they can refer to it at the appropriate time (perhaps even having 2 locations and a pocket-size one to carry around), and...

*Phase 1:* you help them get used to it. This means you will prompt them to use it or remind them about it. Perhaps they'll repeat expectations back to you, or you'll fully explain it for a while. Hint: how to get your child to look at the support? Make it interesting for them. Use favourite pictures... Better yet, get them involved in the making of it!

*Phase 2:* you will point to it without speaking.

*Phase 3:* they will look at it and use it without your prompting.

While visual schedules tend to be life long, your aim in using boundaries & behaviour modification is to eventually phase them out. In other words, the behaviour is adapted/amended or discontinued and the support is no longer needed. Having said this, once they're no longer needed, don't throw them away! Put them to the side and let everyone know where they are – chances are that when life starts getting crazy or your child is given new responsibilities they might need the extra support of a visual handy to complete tasks they could easily do previously.

### **Example of implementation**

To make absolutely sure you have the knowledge required to include visual supports in your parenting, I'm going to come up with a hypothetical scenario and walk you through it.

#### *Behaviour scenario*

A mother states that her son's volume is physically hurting her ears and affecting their relationship. The son is 9 years old and autistic with no speech issues.

\*Note that the behaviour concerned is actually problematic, not merely an inconvenience. The aim is not to simply change behaviour so the child or the parent 'looks' good.

#### *Will a visual support work?*

Before continuing with implementation, check that there are not other factors involved. Ask some questions:

- Is there a reason why the son is raising his voice? Is there a communication issue to be addressed? Are there any times when the volume is louder than others? If so, what is happening during those times? Eg. perhaps the child is being stimulated by another person or something else?
- Does he need to have his hearing checked? Is he capable of lowering his volume? Is he aware that his volume is causing problems? Has it been addressed in any other ways?
- Is this a problem with others or just the mother? Perhaps the mother needs *her* hearing or behaviour checked?
- Perhaps there are other things that need to change and not the child? Or perhaps a compromise is in order?

The conclusion was made that a visual support will indeed work. The environmental impacts on the child's volume must be taken into consideration (for example, he seems to raise his volume when surrounded by other loud noises), and in certain circumstances it is acceptable for the child to be as loud as he likes (and the mother given ear muffs).

### *Choosing a visual support*

It was decided that a 5 point scale would best suit this scenario. It is clear, simple, and easily adaptable. To improve the success of the visual support the son was included in its creation. He is particularly interested in Star Wars and so he was asked to choose pictures that he felt would coincide best with the numbers along the side (this also helped introduce him to the visual support and teach him what the numbers meant). Here is the final product.

5		Yelling Outside voice
4		Loud Outside voice
3		Inside voice
2		Inside voice Whisper
1		Quiet

### *Implementing the visual support*

One way of application is to use the SMART goal method. The primary benefit of this method is that it allows a person to easily understand the parameters (ie. the how, what, when and why) and to remember to incorporate a review. When implementing a visual support, consistency is crucial; you can't do it for a bit and then get distracted and then go flat out for a day then have another week off. This is unfair on everyone. Therefore, only work on one thing at a time, have a clear outline of the objectives, and hold yourself accountable. Research shows that this works best when you have a way of measuring what you're aiming to achieve and a timeframe in which to achieve it.

#### ⇒ Specific

The son will learn to self-monitor his volume within 4 weeks.

#### ⇒ Measurable

The parents will record each time during the day where they have to actively prompt him to reduce his volume. An agreed upon acceptable level *for this particular child* is when it is only a couple of times a week.

#### ⇒ Achievable

The son is 9 years old and the family routine is such that allows for consistency of implementation.

#### ⇒ Realistic

The son is physically capable of lowering his volume and does so when asked. With the help of this visual support the parents are certain that he will be able to monitor his volume with minimal parental involvement.



⇒ Timely

A time limit of 4 weeks has been set before review. If it's not working then the parents will re-think-

- The strategy. Perhaps the visual support isn't right for him (for whatever reason), it is not placed where it's most logical, the parents are not being consistent in its use, the son does not comprehend what is being asked, etc.
- Other factors. Was anything overlooked that might prevent the visual support from working?
- Time frame. Is 4 weeks long enough?
- Incentive. Is it that the child does not see the reason behind the behaviour modification? Does a reward chart need to be set into place or something similar?

If by 4 weeks this behaviour is within the acceptable realm, then the parents can move onto the next behaviour goal and appropriate visual support.

Now, this was a very comprehensive way of implementing a visual support. While it's the ultimate, gold-star standard of implementation, I recognise that it can be somewhat (or completely) daunting and put you off of doing *anything*. If this is the case then just do the best you can. Put in place the most important aspects: make it appropriate, be consistent, and review it every so often. You've got this!

### **Generalising visual supports across environments**

So far I've spoken about the home environment or family context however for those with kids in schools teachers are generally on board with any method that helps to modify a child's behaviour. Visual supports work really well in schools. Again, consistency is really important, so if you can use the same visual support across different environments, the child's understanding of behavioural expectations will grow to encompass these different environments as well. However not all teachers know what they're doing, and I'd say most would welcome you coming to them with a support already adapted to your child's needs and preferences. For example, if it's a 5 point scale, chat to your teacher about whether one would be useful and say that you'd be happy to make one up that you know the kid will appreciate. Or tell them that you're using one at home and you'd like them to implement it into the classroom as well. If you know that the teacher is already using one at school, ask for a copy and how they do it and see how you could implement it at home as well. If not the exact same, then the same principle.

### **Don't forget to give the reason why**

Whenever any training is occurring, remember to give your child the reason why. This will also keep you accountable as to why you're seeking the change in the first place! (If you can't adequately justify it then neither will they.) Telling your child that they need to modify something about themselves is fairly meaningless in the end unless they understand the reasons behind it. Even if they do temporarily change their behaviour it's unlikely to stick long term unless they make the active decision to change.

With this in mind, the idea is to fill their moral warehouse rather than to change behaviour. Seek to train their character and instil in them how God wishes them to treat others (based on His treatment of them) because character is always the best influence of behaviour.