

What are visual strategies?

Visual strategies are a way of supplementing information which is supplied verbally with visual information. They can be used to accomplish a range of goals. You may use something visual to help a pupil to understand a situation, or to provide a visual prompt so a student can accomplish a task more independently.

Visual strategies may take a range of formats including signs, symbols, objects of reference, photographs and writing, or a combination of the above. The needs and skills of the individual should determine the size, format, quantity and complexity of the information being communicated.

Why use visual strategies?

Pupils on the autism spectrum have differences in communication, which means they may struggle to process and respond to information only supplied verbally. In addition, they tend to be visual thinkers. As a result, they will benefit from the use of visual strategies to support their learning.

Using visual strategies will facilitate learning and independence by:

- Enabling the young person to “see” the task. They don’t disappear from them as spoken instructions do.
- Giving additional time for processing time
- Promoting independence by providing a tool learners can refer to in order to identify and carry out the stages of a task.
- In addition, they can be looked at, sequenced, rehearsed and learned.

When you might use a visual strategy

Visual strategies can be used to accomplish a range of purposes. You may use something visual to help a pupil to understand a situation, or to provide a visual prompt so a student can accomplish a task more independently. Visual strategies can be used effectively to:

- 1. Give information** – to answer the who, what, why, where, when questions.
- 2. Explain social situations** – Pupils on the autism spectrum find the social world confusing. Providing social information both verbally and through writing helps students understand.
- 3. Give choices** – Let pupils know what their options are, what is available/ not available.
- 4. Provide structure to the day** – communicate what is happening and when. Knowing this tends to reduce anxiety.
- 5. Teach routines and/or new skills** – Just as when we follow a recipe or the instructions for putting together flat pack furniture, following the steps in a routine is easier when the pupil can see what they need to do and in what order. This will help them to learn the routine and minimize mistakes.
- 6. Be more independent in the environment** – Providing an organised, structured and well labeled environment will help pupils to know where to find the things they need, and where to put them when it is time to clean up?
- 7. Organise the space in the environment** – Some pupils will benefit from visual supports to identify their particular space to work or play or sit? They may benefit from clear visual strategies to communicate the purpose of particular spaces (e.g. art, music etc.) and from knowing which parts of the environment can be used and which parts are “off limits.”

What are visual strategies?

- 8. Support transitions** – Visual strategies can be very helpful in supporting pupils on the autism spectrum to stop one activity and start another, or move from one environment to another.
- 9. Stay on task** – Remembering what the current activity is and staying involved with it until it is completed. What does it mean to be “finished?”
- 10. Manage time** – How long is 5 minutes or one hour? How much time is there before a transition in the schedule? How long am I doing this for? Time is invisible. Timers and clocks turn time into pupils can see. Use something concrete and visual.
- 11. Communicate rules** – these might be generic rules (e.g. class rules) or social rules. Pupils on the autism spectrum might struggle to acquire an understanding of the social rules that many of us acquire instinctively. Visual strategies such as power cards, can help with this.
- 12. Assist students in coping with change** – Prepare for something that is going to change. Preparing students when something will be different from what they normally expect can prevent many problems from occurring.
- 13. Support self-regulation** – Pupils need to learn how to cope when they get anxious or encounter a problem. Strategies such as visual imagery can help with this.
- 14. Aid memory** – Remembering what to do and/or when.
- 15. Communicate emotions** – Although pupils with autism will demonstrate a variety of emotions with their actions may struggle to recognise and name their emotions, and this makes it harder for them to manage them. Helping them to translate those responses into pictures or written language gives an opportunity to explain, clarify or validate their experience.
- 16. Clarify verbal information** – Pupils on the autism spectrum can interpret language very literally and struggle to infer what is meant from what is said (the words used) and the way it is communicated. Making it visual helps clarify the message and helps to eliminate confusion.