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Understanding and Supporting Individuals and Families living with Autism Spectrum Disorders

Autism Spectrum Strategies and Hints. Visual Tool Mini Test

Do you have a **calendar** that you write things on the help you organise your life?

Do you have a **list of things to do** on your desk or refrigerator?

Do you make up a **shopping list** before you go shopping?

Have you ever pointed to a **picture** in a catalogue of an item you would like, to show some one what you want?

Do you ever read a **sign** to tell you what line to stand in or what door to exit from?

Do you ever write **notes** to your family or co-workers to explain what you want them to do?

Did you ever attach a **note** to your bathroom mirror or steering wheel to remind you to do something?

Have you ever read **step-by-step instructions** to assist you to assemble at item?

If you answered yes to any of these questions you have used some form of visual communication. These tools help you organise your life, make a choice, communicate with others or complete a task. We all use visual tools as part of our daily life.

Children with autism are no different; they just need more visual reminders. Examples of visuals are objects, remnants of objects, photos, Boardmaker or graphics, and even written words or cards.

Children with autism require tasks to be broken down in step-by-step instructions. When they are able to "See" what is required or what is to be done, their level of frustration and anxiety decreases and they can easily participate in a variety of settings.

Simply ensuring that children with autism can predict what is happening by using visual schedules provides predictability.

Breaking a task such as toileting down to step by step instructions ensures that a child with autism can visually follow spoken instructions or prompts.

It is not unusual for people to assume children with autism understand more they actually do. Verbal children who use a lot of echolalia (Repeating what others have said, or statements from videos etc) can be particularly deceiving. Just because they can talk, does not mean they understand everything said to them. Their use of verbal communication can distort their overall communication ability.

Pay attention to children who are described like this:

- He is just manipulative
- He acts like he is deaf
- She is inconsistent
- She's off in another world
- He is very distractible
- He does what he wants to
- She doesn't pay attention
- I know he heard me, he just doesn't want to do it
- She understands everything I say
- Sometimes he clicks and sometimes he doesn't
- She doesn't like to listen
- He just does it to annoy me
- She is being stubborn
- He can do other things so he should be able to do this

Think of children with autism as 90% visual and 10% auditory. The numbers are from observation not statistics. They serve only to establish a mind set... a different way of thinking (a change in attitude). Using visuals or modifying your program will not cure children with autism, it will however give them more understanding of what is happening in their educational setting. The goal of education is to maximise a child's individual ability. To achieve this three goals are appropriate and realistic.

1. Teach Skills

We need to help children maximise their skill potential. They need to learn strategies to make their communication interactions as effective, as universal, as efficient and socially acceptable as possible.

2. Teach Compensatory Strategies

Children who learn to use visual supports to help them achieve their goals will benefit from increase participation and independence. Independence and inclusion are certainly long term educational outcomes.

3. Modify Environments to Maximise Learning

Utilise the knowledge we have about children with autism and how they learn. Modifying environments and creating teaching strategies so they have an opportunity to learn more efficiently will maximise their learning time.

The typical environment relies on verbal communication. Communication can become more efficient for children with autism by recognising their need for visuals and providing them with visual supports.

Almost all children with autism can benefit from the use of visual supports. They enhance the child's ability to communicate and include them more into mainstream way of being. Visual are not a magic cure but they can make an EXTRMEME difference!

Structure the Environment with Labels

Label things where they belong:

Labels can show everyone where items belong. What is on a bookshelf, what is in a drawer, where completed work should be placed. The finished work goes in a specific place, the brushes go in the art cupboard in identified containers and the toys go on specific shelves or in designated cupboards.

Label the environment:

Use labels to identify certain activity areas in a room. Label everything in a child's program. For example give specific names to tables or areas of a setting where specific activities take place:

- The art table
- The activity table
- Reading area
- Morning circle
- Book corner
- Play rug
- Snack/eating area
- Play area

Matching is an important skill to learn, according to some developmental curriculum's. Replacing an object in a labelled drawer is a functional performance of that skill. Teaching functional use of skills is much more important than teaching matching lotto pictures.

Remember to use visual cues that are already in the environment, such as exit, toilet etc. this will assist them to gain information about their environment. It is important to teach the child to identify and effectively use the visual supports. Recognising visual supports and then demonstrating an understanding of what they mean by acting on the information correctly is critical.

Other things to consider:

Sensory Processing Difficulties:

Problems with sensory processing can be of three categories. A child can experience too much input because he cannot screen out unimportant information. A child may have an unresponsive sensory system, which receives too little input. Or a child may swing between being over or under stimulated.

Play skills:

Many children with autism do not develop typical play skills. Children with autism need to be observed and assessed as to where they are in relation to developmental play skills. Remember it is no use teaching a child with autism to play a game with other children if they are still at the parallel play stage. Or to teach a child with autism to bath a baby doll if they are still at the sensory stage of mouthing every toy they come in contact with. Imaginative play skills such as using a cardboard box as a boat or a bed can only be taught once all the lower levels of developmental play skills have been achieved.

Reference:

Fouse, B., & Wheeler, M. (1997). *A treasure chest of behavioural strategies for individuals with autism*. Future Horizons, Texas, USA