

# Creating Visual Supports for Autistic Kids at Home



## What are Visual Supports?

Understanding information presented visually is often a strength for autistic people. Visual information can be particularly helpful for children who have language disorders and/or difficulty processing auditory information. Special educators and clinicians created visual support tools to support autistic people at home and at school. This handout describes how to build some of these tools at home.

### *Finding Pictures to Use in Visual Supports*

Color photographs of the actual items (e.g. the child's toothbrush) are easiest to understand. Adults sometimes take digital photographs of the child's environment and include these in the support. Some children can understand line drawings like free clip art, or the "picture symbols" used by speech and language pathologists. Some picture symbols are available for free online by searching for "picture exchange communication system" or "pecs." Hand-drawn pictures are the hardest for children to understand because they are different every time (and because not all adults are natural artists). Words can be helpful for children who have advanced reading skills, but words are less helpful for emerging readers.

### *Using Pictures to Make Visual Supports*

In general, the goal is to have easy access to the visual support when a demand is being placed on a child and the child is still fairly calm. Laminated printouts are a common format for visual supports. If parents do not have access to a computer and printer, often schools or the public library can help print visual supports for use at home. Also some parents use apps on their smartphone rather than printouts.

For laminating, options include self-adhesive laminating sheets, clear Contact Paper, a home laminating machine, and asking school if they will laminate the page. Families can write on laminated pages with markers (e.g. washable or dry erase markers).

## Visual Schedules

Autistic children and adolescents typically do best when they have a regular, predictable routine that they understand. A visual schedule is a written or picture representation of a

### Max's Afternoon Schedule

3:30 – Get home from school. Snack.



4:00 – Homework



4:30 – Playtime



6:00 – Dinner










7:30 – Bedtime



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## Max's School Schedule

Arrival	
Math	
Snack	
Special (PE, art, or music)	
Lunch	
Reading	
Dismissal	

schedule that a child can refer to throughout the day. Parents and teachers can make visual schedules for a particular routine (e.g. brushing teeth), part of the day (e.g. the morning routine), the whole day, or the week, depending on the child's needs. Posting the schedule in the child's environment, and including a laminated copy in the child's backpack, at his/her desk, or in a frequently used notebook can help ensure the child has easy access to the schedule.

Parents and teachers should think carefully about including times on the schedule, as some autistic children are careful timekeepers who are upset by minor changes. Depending on the child, the schedule could include disclaimers like "about" or "approximately," or omit times entirely and just list events in order. If there will be a change in the schedule, tell the child well in advance if possible. Emphasize the things that will remain the same in the schedule (for example, "There's no school on Monday, but you'll still have PE on Tuesday and art on Wednesday"). If part of the schedule will vary from day to day or has not yet been decided, include a "?" or a generic term in the schedule. For example, a weekend schedule might begin "get dressed, eat breakfast, ?, come home for

lunch," etc., with the "?" representing an outing that will change from week to week.

Some parents and teachers use the laminated, Velcro-backed picture technique described below to create a simplified visual schedule board. The schedule board contains three squares where pictures for past ("Finished"), current ("Now"), and future ("Next") activities are attached. When it is time to transition to a new activity, children help move the "Next" picture to "Now," add a new "Next" picture, etc. This type of visual schedule is useful for children who have difficulty with transitions, and whose language skills are still emerging.

## Flowcharts

Flowcharts can be a powerful tool for helping autistic children and adolescents visualize the potential consequences of their choices. Flowcharts can be made with words or pictures, depending on the skills of the child. Some parents and teachers find it helpful to keep a white board or pad of paper handy so they can quickly sketch out a child's options as needed

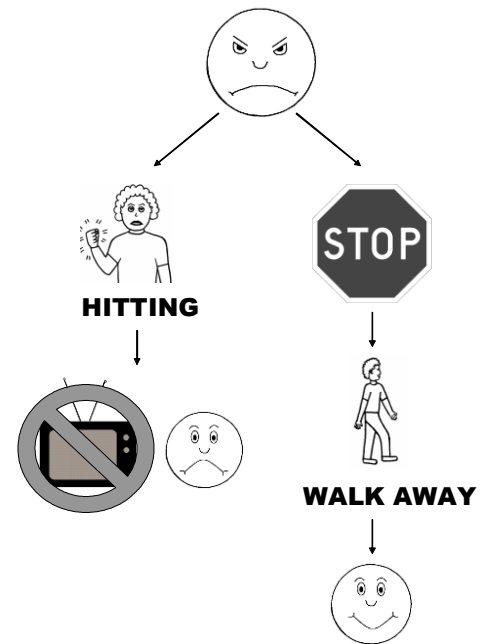
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throughout the day. Others create laminated flowcharts incorporating a child's interests to reinforce important concepts.

## Choice Boards

A choice board is a visual representation of a child's options for a particular choice, like what to have for snack or what to do during free play time. Parents and teachers can laminate photographs or picture symbols, and put Velcro on the back of each picture. They can then create a "choice board" by putting squares of Velcro on a piece of poster board. The child can show his/her choice by attaching a picture to the choice board. For example, parents can provide pictures of foods so a child can show what s/he wants for snack. Many examples are available online (search the internet for "choice boards").



## Tables

Autistic children often have trouble understanding other people's perspectives. This can make others' behavior seem confusing to the child, and can lead to frustration and behavioral problems. Drawing a table illustrating two conflicting perspectives and possible compromises can help defuse a situation and coach perspective taking skills.

Dad wants/feels...	I want/feel...	Possible compromises...
for me to clean my room	to watch tv	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>clean my room first, then watch an extra 10 minutes of tv</li> <li>watch my favorite show now, then clean my room quickly. If I don't clean up quickly I can't watch any tv tomorrow</li> </ul>

## Thermometers and Rating Scales

Autistic children often have trouble gauging and communicating the intensity of their own emotional and physical experiences, making it difficult for them to respond appropriately. Thermometers and ratings scales are intended to give children tools for gaining insight into how

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they are currently feeling. Ideally, immediately after using these self-assessment tools, children are helped to cope with the feelings they have identified. For example, after recognizing that she is angry, a child should be reminded of her “cooling off” strategy so she does not escalate further.

## More Information

- The University of Florida Center for Autism and Related Disorders has videos and instructions. [Visual Supports » Center for Autism and Related Disabilities » College of Medicine » University of Florida \(ufl.edu\)](#)
- The website dotolearn.com has many free resources including picture symbols and schedule templates.

## Recognizing Your Uncomfortable Feelings Using a Feelings Thermometer

