

Why Visual?

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This is a question that is asked frequently when behavior intervention leans heavily on a visual component. Why are we emphasizing the use of visual supports, even for students who understand spoken language?

Visual supports come in the form of Comprehension Guides and numerous Routines that are illustrated with colorful icon symbols and cartoon figures. Visual supports come in the form of Tolerance Meters, First/Then cards, and other means of showing progress through an activity. Visual supports show where breaks are embedded in a work task. The help menu in Distress Tolerance Programs is a visual display. Feedback on performance is a visual display in the form of the Green Zone, as is the Credit Report. Access to reward activities is a visual display of Good Fit, the same program that uses continuous visual feedback to coach students toward better social functioning while engaging in those activities. There are too many examples to list, but the point is made that therapeutic intervention for emotionally, behaviorally, or developmentally impacted children should rely heavily on visual communication.

Below is a list of reasons for reference when designing therapeutic interventions. For additional examples of therapeutic programming with visual support see the following:

<https://kevinplummerphd.com/visual-feedback-system-program-guidelines/>

<https://kevinplummerphd.com/visual-systems-to-increase-motivation-and-support-better-decision-making/>

<https://kevinplummerphd.com/distress-support-plan/>

<https://kevinplummerphd.com/guidelines-for-using-routines/>

<https://kevinplummerphd.com/the-green-zone-a-recognition-based-program/>

Considerations for Incorporating Visual Support into Therapeutic Intervention

1) Visuals are used to create a sense of **stability**, a reminder that things are happening as always, even as conditions seem different, even as staff are different, even as words are different (same set of steps in the same familiar routine). When running a lesson there are lots of things happening, but the visual identifies the stable and the known, the predictable way and the familiar experience. Novelty, lots of different things happening,

increases stress and sympathetic nervous system activity. Some of this is good, to raise interest and alertness, but too much creates problems. Refer to visuals to calm the nervous system with stability and predictability, familiarity.

2) Memory is the antecedent to future behavior. We want the student to remember the essential aspects of the procedure, amidst the variation, to help them do it again the next time they are in the same situation. Visuals focus on the essential while reducing the importance of the “noise” within the routine, enabling the creation of a cleaner **memory** to be triggered the next time the situation is presented. Use visual references to diminish the memories of the noise and focus on the memory of what is important and essential. Visuals of the essential elements of the routine help students forget the irregular aspects, instead of building the irregularity into their routine for the next time. Without visuals you are talking, mentioning many things (all varying in level of importance) and students aren’t necessarily processing what you are telling them so they aren’t making the memory you want them to have for the next time.

3) Visuals give the student **predictability**. If we are using and referring to the visuals we become more predictable people for students (visuals make us more predictable) and the situation we are in becomes more predictable. You may know what to do and you don’t need a visual to help you keep track, but use the visual anyway so that the student can appreciate that they are with a predictable person.

4) Predictability lowers stress just as it also increases engagement and effort. Unpredictability often triggers disengagement in the form of avoidance or premature quitting of the activity. Visuals show **what is happening and what is expected** and this makes things more predictable just as it shows students where their efforts will lead them. One visual per activity isn’t enough to help the student understand what is going on (e.g., one symbol showing morning meeting, which will last for a 30-minute period and where many different things will happen, not just one). Visuals are more supportive if they show the detail of what to do and they show a progression or sequence of the activity.

5) Visuals are the path to independence. Many people think that visuals create dependence (students don't respond to verbal direction so they always need visual clarification), but the opposite is true. Students can look at and determine what to do themselves, instead of waiting or needing to be told what to do. We rely on visuals that allow students to see what to do, how to do it, what to do next, etc. and we use a script that is void of useful information about what to do, other than, "Check your schedule," "Look," "follow your card". We don't want to always have to tell students what to do (verbally), because verbal direction by itself (repeatedly or for each step) is more likely to create dependence on the adult to always furnish the verbal direction. The visual is used to teach what to do and eventually the visual can be simplified in detail until it is just one representative symbol, not all the steps, until the visual is just a reminder.

6) Visuals provide evidence of a student success with independence. They show what the student accomplished on their own (all the steps, all the work), creating a memory of independence and hard work that can be specifically recognized and rewarded and triggered the next time. Use the visual helps to create a memory of independence when paired with the verbal message "Look at what you did all on your own, I am proud of you." Without the visual it is hard for some students to remember accomplishment and easier to remember the stress of doing the task. A visual helps you make the memory you want to make for the student.

7) An embedded visual schedule provides detail about what to do, how much to do, how many, or how long. That is better than just one "Math" because more of a visual breakdown helps students to feel **greater tolerance** for the task (applying more effort before giving up). The smaller the steps, the greater the **feeling of accomplishment** and the more capable the student feels. Visuals create a greater sense of accomplishment than verbal feedback.

8) Visuals reward effort. They show that the more you do the closer you are getting to the end. The visual urges the student on instead of the staff constantly saying, "keep going, you're not finished yet."

9) Visuals also help to **activate reward thinking** (instead of just misery thinking) when students are faced with challenging work, because they present a stable display of the reward that is available at the end of the task (and this can be pointed out by staff as frequently as needed). Misery thinking diminishes motivation and promotes disengagement while reward thinking increases motivation and promotes effort. We can prompt reward thinking by directing the student focus to the visual of the reward activity, “That will be a lot of fun when you finish your work and get free time.”

10) Visuals **improve the comprehension of verbal language**. Verbal language is often processed in an irregular and inefficient way with variable rates of attention and difficulty keeping up, but when you are pairing your verbal language with the visual, the visual is used to organize and simplify what the student hears.

11) Visuals help **orient the student to the present** after they have drifted or become preoccupied. Too much verbal direction and instruction can promote "mind wandering" and lead to disorientation; thus, students can easily lose track of what's going on and respond in ways that do not match the emotion or expectation of the situation (but do match wherever their mind went). The visual tells them what is happening, what is expected, and what routines are currently being used.

12) Visuals make it easier to **redirect** the student when the student is doing the wrong thing (rather than correcting behavior, "stop this, don't do that"). Verbal correction provides attention to what is wrong, redirection (pointing to the visual of what is expected) provides attention to what is right. Verbal correction invites protest and argument, a back-and-forth form of negotiating or getting out of what is required. As long as we're talking about it with the student we are encouraging this, because students know that people can change their minds and be talked into things. Visuals don't change their mind, no matter how much you protest and argue. They continue to speak the same message, long after the teacher has left and started working with someone else, and they will speak the same message when the teacher returns to check on the student. The student knows this, and also knows there's no point arguing, the teacher goes by the visual.

13) We use visuals to teach the use of a tool (e.g., a step-by-step routine) that can be used **to navigate new and more challenging situations**. Teach the visual support system (e.g., a progress through device) so students can learn the system (with something easy) and become familiar with its effectiveness, the way it communicates, the way it helps them, so they can use the same system when they really need it for support, when situations become more challenging. It's better for a student to learn about a support when it's easy to learn, when they don't absolutely need it, when it can be associated with success.