Visual Scheduling:
What It Is and How to Get Started

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What Is Visual Scheduling?

Visual scheduling presents the abstract concept of time in a concrete and manageable form. The ability to predict time brings order and security to a person, allowing him or her to spend time learning rather than being frightened or worried about what comes next.

A child’s level of understanding will dictate what type of visual representation will be used in a schedule, but generally the hierarchy of abstraction of visual symbols is, from low to high:

1. Gestures
2. Full-size objects
3. Miniature objects
4. Photographs
5. Colored drawings
6. Black and white drawings
7. Written words
8. Written phrases
9. Written sentences
10. Signing

Experiment with the symbols to see which symbols the child can match. Always try to use the most adult-like type of symbol the child is able to match. Continue to instruct more advanced symbol matching through the child’s school career.

How to Get Started Creating a Visual Schedule

Step 1: Create the Schedule

Create a symbol of each current activity in the child’s day. Arrange them in order. Initially it is essential to include everything the student does in a day (e.g., bathroom breaks, snack time, reinforcers, group time, therapies, recess, lunch). Once using the schedule becomes part of the routine, the child will be able to group minor activities into larger activity areas requiring fewer symbols.

Step 2: Give the Schedule to the Child

Depending on the child’s functioning level, give him or her the whole day’s schedule or a partial day’s schedule. Do not present only one item at a time. The purpose of the schedule is to give the child advance notice of upcoming activities so that he or she can predict what will happen next.

The schedule must be accessible to the child. The schedule can be placed on the wall next to the child’s workstation, on his or her desk, on a shelf next to his or her desk, or hanging from his or her belt loop. Many children carry calendars, class schedules, trip logbooks, assignment books, or other visual schedules. The child will eventually wish to carry his or her schedule like everyone else.
Step 3: Teach How to Use the Schedule

Instruct the child how to use the schedule, including the process of attending to the schedule. Each day, direct the child to the schedule immediately upon entry into the classroom. Throughout the day, you should consistently look at and point to the schedule using key phrases such as “check your schedule” instead of verbally cueing the next activity. Words disappear once said, and a concrete representation of activities can be processed more easily.

For a lower-functioning child, use a one-to-one discrete trial format to teach use of the schedule. This would look something like:

- Hand the child the visual symbol
- Bring the child’s eyes to the matching visual symbol located on a container
- Prompt his or her hand to grasp the container and pull it toward him or herself while holding the matching symbol in the other hand near it
- Put the symbol into the container
- Do the activity
- Leave the setting

Next, place two symbols side by side within the child’s visual field, repeat the above steps with the first symbol, prompting the child to look at and pick up the second symbol immediately following completion of the first task. Finish the sequence. Continue to increase the number of visual symbols, remembering to include symbols for activities, reinforcers, and work tasks. While teaching use of the schedule, always use previously mastered tasks (such as “put in”) because you are teaching the process not the task. Later, you can put instruction of tasks into the schedule.

Step 4: Teach Acceptance of Schedule Changes

Teach acceptance of changes in routine by changing the schedule periodically. The child will notice the change and may become upset or attempt to return the schedule to the old routine. Acknowledge his or her expressions of anxiety while pointing to the schedule and referring to previously accepted activities. While pointing to the schedule, say, “Yes, something has changed, but your regular (or favorite) activity is next.” If the child perseverates on the schedule change, simply cue him or her to check the schedule. High-anxiety events are generally diffused before they occur because the schedule predicted their occurrence in advance.

Step 5: Add Changes to the Schedule

Begin to insert new functional/meaningful tasks into the schedule. Once you and the child have become accustomed to the use of the schedule (usually within the month or within a few days for higher-functioning children), then:

1. Assemble the materials needed for a new task
2. Select a visual symbol to represent that task
3. Insert the symbol into the child’s schedule
4. Teach the new task as it occurs in the schedule

Create a new task about once every week or two. Gather one older task, box or bag it, label it, and store it in your closet. Later, rotate the task back into the schedule to check for maintenance of skills. Remember, individualized education program (IEP) objectives can be taught in multiple ways, using different materials, and with different people.

This is a great way to generalize!