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“Please Don’t Take Away My Visual Schedule!”

13 Reasons to Use (and keep using) Visual Schedules and 4 Reasons Why They Work

We all like to have an idea of what is going to happen in our day. Children with autism miss many of the language and social/behavioral cues that help the rest of us understand what is happening. Children can become anxious, resistant and may misbehave simply because they have no way to anticipate the events that come upon them each day. Here are some ideas that may help with that.

Visual Schedules Help the Staff:

1. In the long run, providing a child with autism a visual schedule and helping him/her learn to use it almost always makes the teacher’s job easier, not harder. Once the child has a visual schedule, his or her behavior will very often settle. Thus, a schedule does not make the child appear to be different; it helps him appear to be more the same as other children. Visual schedules increase on-task behavior and therefore increase academic learning time.
2. Visual schedules quickly inform the child about the day’s and/or activity’s expectations. Visual schedules can help provide independence by removing the need for the student to ask others (particularly adults) about what schoolwork has to be done. The fact that the student functions more independently (“normally”) can increase his or her acceptance by peers.
3. Because they provide a means for the child to anticipate upcoming events, visual schedules help to ease the student through transitions. Visual schedules provide a means by which adults can systematically introduce the element of change into a student’s day. Thus, a schedule is a means of reducing rigid behavior. In fact, used properly, they promote flexible behavior. Once the student knows how the visual schedule works, he or she will be less dependent upon consistency of staffing in order to function. Teachers or support people can be absent and the day won’t “fall apart” for the student.
4. Visual schedules (written or pictured) work so effectively that you may be tempted to offer their advantages to other students in the class who don’t have an autism spectrum disorder, but who also could use help in learning to plan and organize themselves and their day.
5. Many academically capable children, helped in their young years by the use of visual schedules, will later be able to transfer their understanding of agendas to computerized day planner systems.

Visual Schedules Help the Child:

6. The use of visual schedules capitalizes on the visual learning/memory strength that most children with autism have. The child will often remember what s/he has seen on the schedule, although what they have been told may be forgotten.
7. The use of visual schedules is one support strategy that can provide the organization, structure, and predictability that are so essential to autistic individuals. When they lack such supports, autistic individuals find the world to be highly unpredictable and confusing.
8. Visual schedules teach the importance of organization in a day. The child who learns to help prepare a visual schedule is developing a habit that will promote good organizational methods throughout life. Often helping to prepare the schedule daily gives the child a sense of some autonomy and control of the daily events in a world of confusing demands.
9. Visual schedules may minimize the need to write as the daily agenda is being established; handwriting is often difficult for children who experience autism.
10. Many academically capable children, helped in their young years by the use of visual schedules, will later be able to transfer their understanding of agendas to computerized day planner systems.
11. The use of the visual schedule can be extended to teach the child long-range planning formats for multi-stage or multi-task assignments such as term papers or other semester length projects.
12. The schedule can help the child learn patience and persistence. The alternating pattern of choice and work items within the visual schedule teaches the child that there are some required tasks within the day that are followed by more preferred activities. This "delayed gratification" is widely expected in our society, especially in work settings. The visual display may also serve as a reminder to a child that a preferred activity is only a few steps away after the completion of a non-preferred task.
13. When the student learns to remove icons or check off completed tasks he is able to see his progress. This representation of accomplishment helps to build a sense of success and, thus, to improve self-esteem.

And Here are a Few Reasons Why Visual Schedules Work:

1. Children with autism spectrum disorders often have difficulty sequencing ideas and procedures. The visual schedule demonstrates sequencing and promotes an understanding of it on a daily basis.
2. The use of visual schedules capitalizes on the visual learning/memory strength that most autistic children have. Visual schedules are tangible and non-transitory; auditory language is fleeting. A child may not have heard/processed what the teacher said, but still has the schedule for reference.
3. Some children with autism have obvious difficulties with language. Others may appear to have good or even excellent language skills. However, even the capable child with autism can have difficulties understanding spoken language for the following reasons:

- a. Slow processing time may interfere with the child's ability to really "take in" verbal instructions and much of what is said may be missed.
 - b. Children on the often spectrum are often dealing with sensory malfunction which may make it almost impossible for the child to attend to what is being said.
 - c. Children with autism are almost always highly stressed by their lack of understanding of the social milieu in which they must function. The child may be so overwhelmed with attempting to deal with social events and expectations, that he or she may entirely miss language-based input. Stress can even be brought on by the experience of being physically close to other children. The child is least likely to process auditory verbal information when he or she is upset, worried or angry. There is a greater likelihood that s/he will be able to process visual information.
 - d. Children with autism often have poor sleep patterns. Their sleep maybe brief or interrupted and they will, therefore, often be too tired to be attentive.
 - e. Children on the autism spectrum may have great challenges in understand the pragmatics of communication. Gestures, vocal intonation, facial expressions, conversations pauses and emphases may be lost on these children.
 - f. There is a tendency among children on the spectrum to take words literally. What they hear may not be mediated by an intrinsic understanding of the social situation, nor by an understanding of the personality and intent of the speaker. In attempting to understand something that has just been said, even the bright child may miss other parts of the communication.
4. Many children with autism have a poor sense of time and have difficulty understanding the vocabulary of time and order (e.g. before, after, then, yesterday, first, second). These words are used daily however as the schedule is set up. Thus, use of schedules teaches time and time concepts and vocabulary directly, routinely and systematically.

This material is adapted from Brown, Margaret *30 Reasons to Use and to Keep Using a Visual Schedule or "Please Don't Take Away My Visual Schedule."* (2002) Provincial Outreach Program for Autism and Related Disorders in British Columbia.