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Missouri's educational leader in autism support

Thirteen Tips for Making and Using Visual Schedules

1. Color-code the backing or border for your schedule symbols; have one color for "work" tasks, another color for "choice" tasks. Choose yet another color for symbols for communication boards.

2. The "choice" option card is placed in the daily schedule, but it refers to a display of preferred activities that is represented in some other place: a spot on the wall, a book, etc. where all the "choice" activities can be viewed.

3. It often helps to begin and end each day with a "choice" symbol, and to have "choice" available right after recess. Placed in the schedule at these times, "choice" provides a motivation for the child to come into the school building, and helps to end the day on a high note.

4. Display only as many "choice" items as you know the student can understand; you may begin with no more than two choices displayed at a time, and gradually add additional items as the student demonstrates the ability to select appropriately from three or more options.

5. It's just fine to vary the choices available at any one point in the day. For example, you will add "choice" items that pertain to outside activities when that is appropriate, but not have those items displayed when the weather is against you.

6. A preferred fine-motor activity and/or a preferred gross-motor activity should always be made available in the "choice" menu, and a "rest" or "break" should always be available. "Rest/break" provides the student with an opportunity to rest or relax, even momentarily, from sensory and language stimulation and/or when demands are dramatically reduced. Having a "rest" usually calms the student sufficiently to increase the likelihood of improved concentration and appropriate behavior after the rest.

   BTW: Always use your judgement about how long to stick with a "work" task. Abbreviate it when you can tell that the student is giving you his or her unique signals that s/he has had enough (even when "breaks" have been made available).

7. Consider using some sort of audible signal to indicate transitions between one activity and another. A bell, or repeated words such as, "3, 2, 1, All done", used *consistently* by the adult as each task changes, becomes an automatic signal to the student that it is time to transition to the next event. Automaticity reduces the stress often associated with transitions, and increases the likelihood of rapid compliance.

8. The addition of a visual stimulus can also be helpful in the transition process. Timers, or 3, 2, 1 countdown strips can be used *in conjunction* with the audible signal to increase the saliency of the transition cues.

9. It does not matter if visual schedules are displayed horizontally or vertically, or in a daytimer-type book format. Use the method that works in your classroom and that is appropriate to the student's age. However, always use top to bottom or left to right.

10. You will want to consider the mobility of your schedule for children who routinely receive instruction in more than one location. The student should always have the schedule **available and visible.**

11. *Do involve the student* in setting the activity symbols into place each day. Start by teaching the child to add the occasional item, and work toward achieving as much independence as the child can attain in setting his or her schedule.

12. Some children are not able to make an association between an activity and a pictorial representation of that activity. For these children, we use a miniature or actual size representation of the activity. For example, a miniature toilet, or a toilet paper roll may be used to represent toileting time; a plastic tumbler or spoon can be used to represent eating time. The student may carry the item on the way to the next scheduled activity.

13. Some children will have great difficulty moving beyond these object representations to a more abstract representation such as a line-drawing or Boardmaker™ symbols. However, that link may be taught by consistently pairing a photograph and/or line-drawing with the object that you are using to represent the activity. In time, and over many exposures to this pairing, the student will come to understand the picsym as a reference to the activity.

Adapted from Margaret Brown, Provincial Outreach Program of Autism and Related Disorders, British Columbia.