

Visuals should support the person - not control them.

Visual supports make information easier to see, revisit and act on. They may be useful for autistic and other neurodivergent people, people with intellectual or communication disabilities, young children and anyone who benefits from clear, lasting information.



MAKE INFORMATION LAST

Spoken words disappear quickly. A picture, object, written word or checklist remains available for review.



REDUCE UNCERTAINTY

Schedules and transition cues show what is happening now, what comes next and when an activity is finished.



SUPPORT REAL CHOICE

Choice boards provide accessible ways to express preferences, refuse, request a break or ask for something different.



EXPAND COMMUNICATION

Visuals can complement speech, sign, gesture and AAC. They must never be used to withhold another communication method.



BUILD INDEPENDENCE

Step-by-step sequences and checklists can reduce reliance on repeated adult prompting.



MAKE EXPECTATIONS CLEAR

Visuals can clarify routines and safety information without shaming, threatening or demanding compliance.

A respectful starting point

Ask the person and those who know their communication well what helps. Offer visuals as access tools, teach their meaning, keep them available, and notice whether they reduce effort or create more stress.

MATCH THE VISUAL TO THE PERSON

There is no single "correct" type of visual

Start with the format the person already understands.

A person may use one format or a combination. Move to greater abstraction only when it is meaningful - not because one format is assumed to be more advanced or desirable.



OBJECT OR PART-OBJECT

Use the actual item or a meaningful part of it, such as a cup for drink or a towel for bathing.



PHOTOGRAPH

Use a clear photo from the person's perspective with an uncluttered, high-contrast background.



PICTURE OR SYMBOL

Use a familiar drawing or symbol. Check that the person understands what it represents.



WORD OR NUMBER

Use plain written words, numbers or checklists; combine with pictures when helpful.

Design for quick understanding

- **ONE IDEA**
Show one clear action, place, person or choice per card.
- **ACCESSIBLE**
Place visuals within reach, sight and the person's usual environment.
- **DURABLE**
Use sturdy cards, folders, wipe-clean sleeves or a protected device.
- **CONSISTENT**
Use the same image and words for the same meaning.
- **READABLE**
Use high contrast, simple backgrounds and enough spacing.
- **FLEXIBLE**
Include "change", "wait", "not available", "break" and "all done".

Check understanding - do not test compliance.

Observe whether the person uses, refers to or responds meaningfully to the visual. If not, change the image, size, position, number of choices or format.

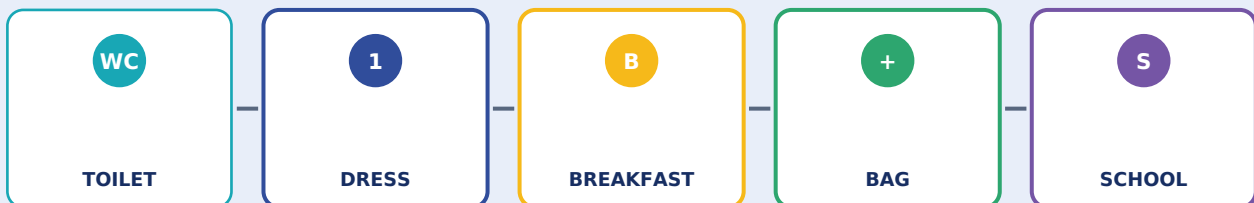
BUILD A VISUAL SCHEDULE

Show now, next, change and finished

A schedule should make the day more understandable.

It can show a whole day, part of a day or only the next few steps. Use a horizontal or vertical layout according to how the person scans information.

EXAMPLE: MORNING ROUTINE



How to create and use it

- 1 **SELECT**
Choose the time period and the fewest useful steps.
- 2 **CREATE**
Use meaningful objects, photos, symbols or words; label consistently.
- 3 **PLACE**
Put the schedule where it can be reached and checked independently.
- 4 **TEACH**
Model how to check, remove, turn over or move each completed item.
- 5 **UPDATE**
Show changes honestly. Use a “change” card rather than hiding surprises.
- 6 **REVIEW**
Ask what works. Adjust the number, order, size or format when needed.

Always include a way to communicate “break”, “help”, “no” and “different”.

Predictability supports regulation, but a schedule should not remove autonomy or override distress, pain, fatigue or sensory needs.

Build a small toolkit around real communication needs.

The best visual is the one the person can understand and use. Keep language neutral, honour refusal and provide access across environments.



CHOICE BOARD

Begin with two meaningful, available options. Include “none”, “something else” or “not now” when possible.



FIRST / THEN

Clarify a short sequence: FIRST shoes, THEN outside. Do not use preferred activities as leverage for tolerating pain or overload.



COMMUNICATION CARDS

Portable cards can express: help, break, wait, stop, yes, no, toilet, pain, quiet and all done.



FEELING & BODY MAP

Offer words or images for emotions, sensory states and body sensations. Accept pointing, matching, gesture or AAC.



TASK SEQUENCE

Break routines such as handwashing, dressing or packing a bag into visible, manageable steps.



BOUNDARY & SAFETY CUES

Use clear, specific information such as “hot”, “road”, “private” or “not available”; explain what the person can do instead.

MINI EXAMPLE

FIRST

Put on shoes



THEN

Go outside

Respectful implementation checklist

● Available when needed ● Taught without pressure ● Updated when plans change ● Never used to silence communication ● Related with the person