

Visual Timetables

A visual timetable (or schedule) is an important tool to support children and adults to understand what is happening across the day. We all use visual timetables of some sort. A child's timetable might have symbols or photos and an adult might use the calendar app on their phone or a planner stuck to the fridge. You never outgrow a visual timetable - they just change as you age and as your language/literacy skills develop over time.

Why use a visual timetable?

There is clear research evidence* regarding the benefits of using visual timetables with individuals of all ages with a range of disabilities. Visual timetables can:

- increase independence, which can increase self-esteem
- decrease anxiety
- increase understanding of verbal language
- increase an individual's flexibility
- support an individual to remain calm and reduce inappropriate or challenging behaviours
- may support an individual to learn new concepts and broaden their interests
- makes abstract time concepts, such as "later", "next", or "last", more concrete



Check out this video for more information:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s1eZ7h6u3JM&index=5&list=PLdtbRx1dk8rICkwS4XVjMvVmxUbgZOKm>

What is a visual timetable?

- A visual timetable lists the sequence of upcoming activities or events through the use of symbols, real objects, photographs or written words. A visual timetable tells an individual where they should be and when they should be there.
- The problem with real life is that things change unexpectedly. It is this change that can often cause increased anxiety and result in behaviours of concern. Using a visual timetable can develop a positive routine of looking for information about what is happening next and therefore increase flexibility and the ability to cope with life's changes. It can also increase independence as the individual can learn to move from one activity to another using the timetable rather than relying on someone to lead them or verbally remind them to move to the next activity.

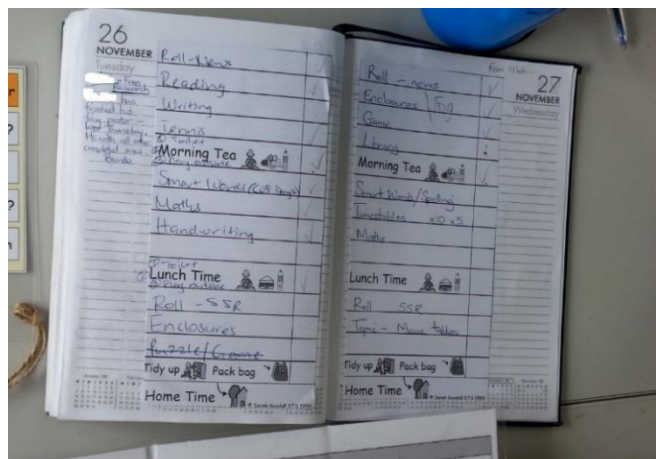
Check out this video on "What is a visual timetable?" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jr56lhhZ40s>

What does a visual timetable look like?

Visual timetables can look very different depending on the needs of the child or adult who is using it. They may be laid out horizontally or vertically; they may have only "first" and "next" on them or have all the activities of the whole day listed; they might have real objects, symbols, photos or just words; they might be really small and portable or large and stuck to the wall. Many examples are displayed in this document to provide you with ideas.

When to use a visual timetable?

It is important to construct the visual timetable at the beginning of the day and to check it after every single activity is finished. You might need to break the day down into smaller chunks for some individuals. You may just display the first part of the day's routine (greetings, news, reading, sensory room, morning tea...) and then construct the next part of the schedule after morning tea. Some individuals might only be able to cope with knowing what's going to happen "now" and "then" rather than having the whole morning's routine displayed.



Where to use a visual timetable?

Visual timetables can be used at home, at work or a vocational centre. Adults use diaries, calendars, reminders and text or email alerts to remind us when and where and what time an activity is going to occur, which is exactly the same as using a visual schedule with an individual with disability. Because home, work or vocational service events tend to be relatively routine we assume that the individual "knows" what is going to happen today because it was the same as last Tuesday. However, if you lost your diary this morning would you remember exactly what time you'd booked your appointment for and that you'd swapped your run in the park to a workout in the gym because of the rain forecast?

Important note: stick the visual schedule in one place and try to always put it back in the same place, e.g. the fridge, bedroom door, desk, etc. This will increase independence as the individual will know where to go to check what is happening next and won't need to ask "what are we doing next" all the time.



How to make and use a visual timetable?

- Customise the activities for your personalised timetable

Write a list of all the activities you do. Then use Microsoft Word and photos from your camera or images from the internet OR you can use the Swedish symbol software on <http://bildstod.se/> website to create your own for free (check out our Tip of the Month to learn more) OR use BoardMaker software.

- Teach Schedule Use

Like any new concept, using a schedule is something that you need to teach. The individual needs to know how to use it and what it is for. You can do this by placing the schedule, object or picture in their hand and gently physically prompting them (from behind) to go to the desired area. It is important not to be in front of them leading them to the area as this can cause them to become overly dependent on you rather than looking at the schedule. You can explain (briefly) the concept of schedules.

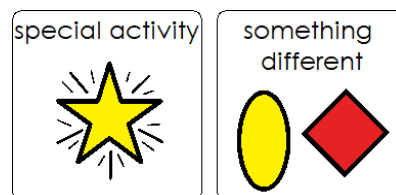
Set up schedule together, e.g. “Ok Jane. Let’s see what we are doing today. First we are going to have breakfast (place breakfast symbol on schedule), then reading (place reading symbol on schedule), then morning tea, then café, then...”

After each activity is finished, e.g. “Breakfast is finished now Jane (take breakfast symbol off schedule and place in the finished basket or book or envelop). Next we are doing reading (point to reading symbol on schedule).

Have a look at Polly (specialist teacher) using her visual timetable at KiwiChat Day: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8m1qce5oqTk&index=4&list=PLdtbRx1dk8rICkwS4XVjMvVmxcUbgZOKm> And the Speech Therapy students using a visual timetable with adults at a communication group: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L88_7h6SsOE&index=3&list=PLdtbRx1dk8rICkwS4XVjMvVmxcUbgZOKm

- Making Changes to the Schedule

When (not if!) things change after you put up the timetable for the day, take the individual to the timetable and explain that there has been a change, e.g. “we were going to go to the park (point at park symbol) after lunch (point at lunch symbol) but it is raining now. We have to make a change. Change is ok. We are going to take park off and put café up. Let’s look at what we will be doing today. We are going to finish doing the puzzle, then have lunch, then go to a café, then....” A ‘change’ or ‘surprise!’ symbol can become your best friend. Individuals’ anxiety levels may be dramatically reduced if you take the time to teach that change is ok, and not always scary. Use the ‘change’ or ‘surprise!’ or ‘something different’ or ‘special activity’ symbol when you do not have the exact symbol you need, e.g. ‘Easter egg hunt’ is not a symbol you will use every day, so use the ‘surprise!’ or ‘something special’ symbol for these rare events.



- Be consistent in placing all the activities on the schedule - especially if unexpected things happen.

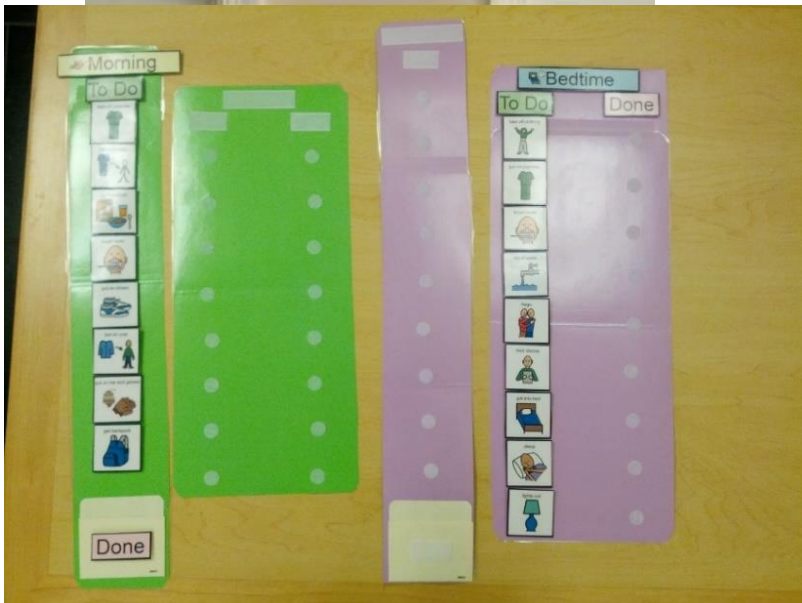
A characteristic of many individuals with disabilities is that they are quick to develop routines and can be intolerant of change. This can often lead to behavioural difficulties. By using the schedule to show upcoming changes, you are teaching the individual to become more flexible and more accepting of change because it is happening within the familiar routine of checking the schedule.

Things to think about when creating your visual timetable

Visual timetables come in all shapes and sizes. Think about what the individual needs to get from using a timetable and how they might best understand the information.

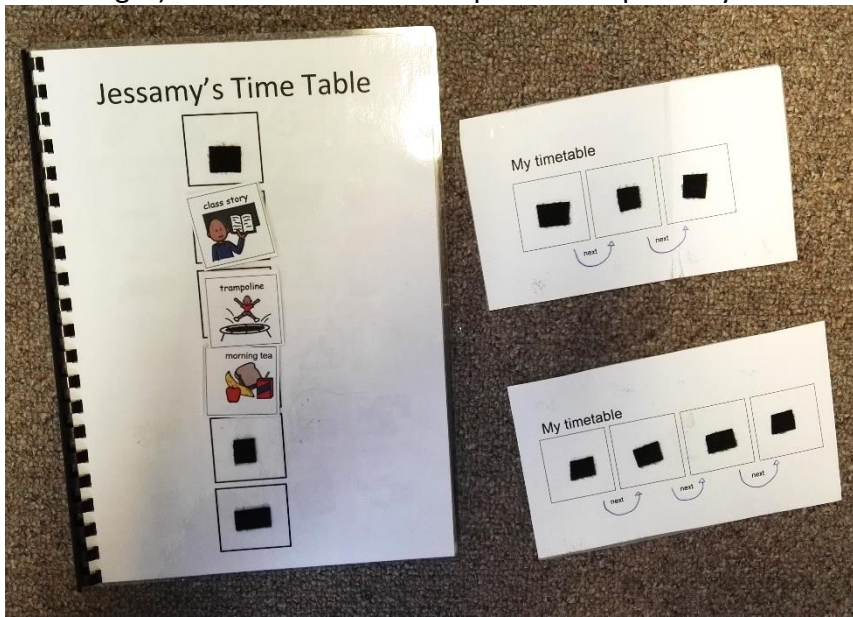
- Do they need symbols as well as the written word?
- Where will the schedule be displayed?
- Does it need to be portable so that they can take it with them or will it be stuck in one place?
- Will they need to have an additional personalised, portable schedule?
- How will they know when something is finished?
- Will they be able to cope with seeing the whole days’ worth of activities or do you need to break it into shorter blocks of time? Or do they just need to see an overview of the week? E.g. The next phot shows a weekly timetable, which could be used to show the overall events/activities of the week:





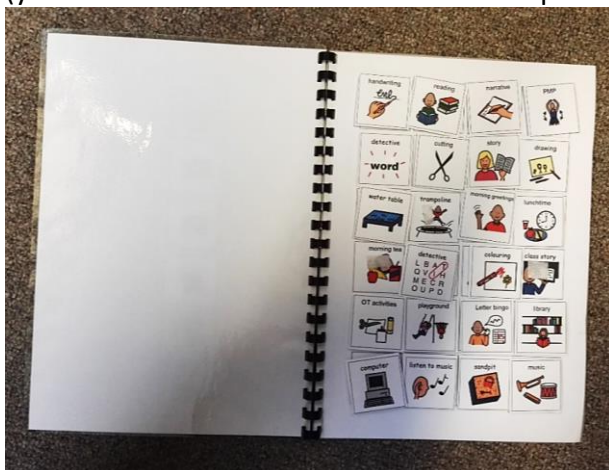
Visual timetable book

Some people find it easiest to keep the timetable in a book format. The 'space' to put the visuals is on the front of the book (pictured on the left) (OR you can use a pull off smaller laminated paper (pictured on the right) with the number of steps that the person you are working with can cope with.



Then on the inside of the book are ALL the visuals required across the day. That way they are all in one place (rather than having zip lock bags or ice cream containers that you have to riffle through to find the visual you are looking for!). Try to list the symbols in alphabetical order when you create the timetable book so that the adult can find them quickly. Or perhaps group symbols according to the type of activities, e.g. all the literacy activities on one page, all the outside games on one page, all the 'sensory break' activities on one page, etc.).

When you have a list of all the symbols, print two of each page, one that is part of the book and then cut the other one up and stick each visual on top. This means that you can immediately see if you are missing a symbol and then you can just re-print that one rather than having to reprint all the visuals (you can see the white Velcro stuck on top of some of the visuals on the picture below).



You can download a template for this visual timetable book from: https://talklinktrust-my.sharepoint.com/:f/g/personal/jessamy_amm_talklink_org_nz/Etwio4fYr55OmlKslfuBd78B_kX84DgOfZpI0irhW0fRuQ?e=JL924I

*References:

<http://www.iidc.indiana.edu/?pageId=394>

<http://www.education.com/reference/article/visual-schedule-classroom-autism-ASD/>

Created by Jessamy Bell (Speech Language Therapist) on 12/03/2019