

Visual Schedules

WHY?

There is clear research evidence* regarding the benefits of using visual schedules with individuals with a range of disabilities as it 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

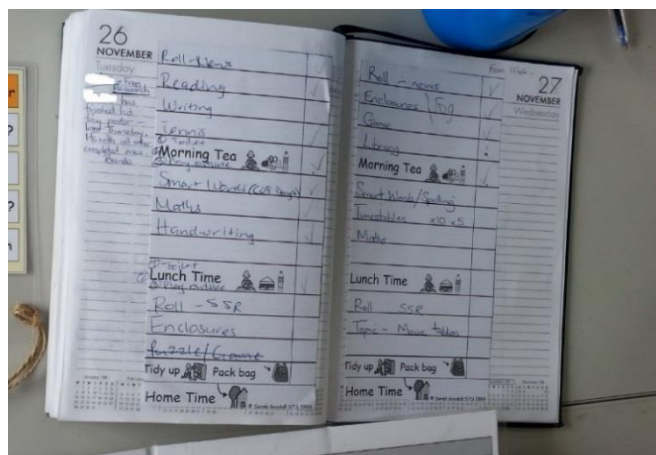


WHAT?

- A visual schedule communicates the sequence of upcoming activities or events through the use of real objects, photographs, symbols or written words. A visual schedule 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 inappropriate behaviours. Using a visual schedule can develop a positive routine of looking for information and thus increase flexibility and the ability to cope with life's ups and downs in the future. It can also increase independence as the individual can learn to move from one activity to another using the schedule rather than relying on someone else to lead them or verbally prompt them to the next activity.

WHEN?

It is important to construct the visual schedule 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.



WHERE?

Visual schedules can be used at home, at work or a day service centre.

We 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 day 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 didn’t have your diary 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 do not move it. This will increase independence as the individual will know where to go to check what is happening next.

HOW?

- 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).

- Making Changes to the Schedule

When (not if) things change since you first put up the schedule, take the individual to the schedule 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!’ 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.

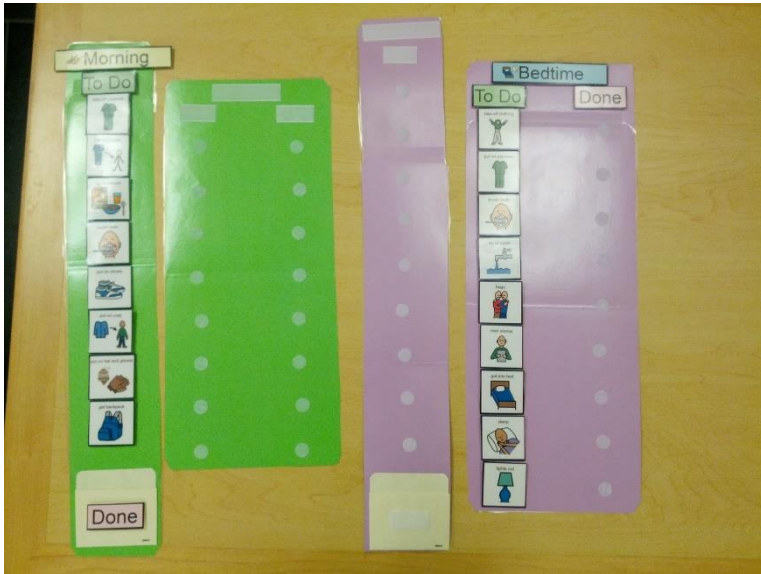
A characteristic of many individuals with disabilities is that they are quick to develop routines and can be intolerant of change. This can often lead to behavioural difficulties. By using the schedule to show upcoming changes, you are teaching the individual to become more flexible and more accepting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



More Examples

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

- Do they need symbol support as well as the written word?
- Where will the schedule be displayed?
- 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 blocks?



* <http://www.iidc.indiana.edu/?pageId=394>
<http://www.education.com/reference/article/visual-schedule-classroom-autism-ASD/>