

# 25 Reasons to Use Visual Strategies with Students with Autism

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Autism Digest

Parents and teachers working “in the trenches” with individuals on the autism spectrum know that the expressive and receptive communication challenges these kids typically have can impair learning. Whether it’s social conversation, understanding a written assignment, or being able to decipher more figurative language we all tend to use, if effective communication is our goal, we need to use more than our voices with this population. We need to use visual strategies too!

What are visual strategies? They are anything you can SEE that can help a child better understand the world. Photographs, drawings, a tangible object, a sign or label, a gesture, written notes, or a clock are all visual tools.

Why use them? We use visual tools to accomplish a purpose, and we can use different tools for different purposes. Perhaps we use something visual to help a student understand a situation. Maybe we provide a visual prompt so a student can accomplish a task more independently. Or be more organized. Defining the need guides the decision about what kind of visual tool to use. Identifying the purpose helps us know how to use it.

Is your school or home environment a visual-friendly place? Here are 25 functional areas in which visual tools can help the student with autism or Asperger’s Syndrome.

## **1- Establish Attention**

Looking helps students establish attention better than just listening. Once they have focused their attention, the rest of the communication message can get in.

## **2- Give Information**

How do students get information to answer the who, what, why, where, when questions?

## **3- Explain Social Situations**

The social world can be confusing. People are moving, changing, and often unpredictable. Sharing social information through written as well as verbal avenues helps students process and understand.

## **4- Give Choices**

How do students know the available options? What choices they have? How about options that are not available?

## **5- Give Structure to the Day**

Telling what is happening or what is not happening. Sharing the big picture tends to reduce anxiety.

## **6- Teach Routines**

Following multiple steps in a routine will be easier when the student can see the steps. They will learn a routine faster when they don't make a lot of mistakes guessing or trying to recall what comes next.

## **7- Organize Materials in the Environment**

Where are the things we need? Is it clear where to put supplies away when it is clean-up time?

## **8- Organize the Space in the Environment**

Can the student identify his or her own space to work, play or sit? Which parts of the environment can he use and which parts are "off limits"?

## **9- Teach New Skills**

Learning to operate a new toy or piece of equipment. Learning a new task or academic skill.

## **10- Support Transitions**

Stopping one activity to start another. Moving from one environment to another. Anything that involves a shift or change.

## **11- Stay on Task**

Remembering what the current activity is and staying involved with it until it is completed. Seeing what constitutes 'finished.'

## **12- Ignore Distractions**

Help students consciously focus their attention on desired activities or interactions.

## **13- Manage Time**

How long is five minutes or one hour? How much time is there before a transition in the schedule? Time is invisible. Timers and clocks turn time into something students can see, something concrete and visual.

#### **14- Communicate Rules**

People presume students know the rules. That is often not true. Perhaps they don't remember. Or they don't understand. Or they get too impulsive or excited.

#### **15- Assist Students in Handling Change**

Prepare for something that is going to change. Preparing students for situations where something will be different from what they normally expect can prevent many problems from occurring.

#### **16- Guide Self-Management**

Students need to learn how to manage themselves when they get anxious or encounter a problem.

#### **17- Aid Memory**

Remembering what to do or when to do it. Remembering the name of an object or a person. (Think about how many ways you provide cues for yourself for this one!)

#### **18- Speed Up Slow Thinking**

Some students have lots of information in their brains, but it takes them a very long time to access it. Visual cues can speed that process.

#### **19- Support Language Retrieval**

Did you ever have an experience where you know someone's name but you just can't remember it? Or you know what something is but can't recall the word? Then once you hear it or see it you instantly remember. (The older we are, the worse it becomes!) Students can experience the same challenges in remembering and word retrieval.

#### **20- Provide Structure**

Structure means organized and predictable. Many students function better in environments where changes are minimal. Strive for an environment that provides visual organization and information.

#### **21- Learn Vocabulary**

Create a personal dictionary with pictures and words of items important in the child's life: peoples' names, favorite toys or videos, activities or places. Students learn information better when they can access it over and over.

## **22- Communicate Emotions**

Students demonstrate a variety of emotions with their actions. Translating those responses into pictures or written language gives an opportunity to explain, clarify or validate their experience.

## **23- Clarify Verbal Information**

What I understood might not be what you meant. Making it visual helps clarify our conversation. It eliminates confusion.

## **24- Organize Life Information**

Think of phone numbers, calendars, cooking instructions, shopping lists, social security numbers, appointments, etc.

## **25- Review & Remember**

One of the greatest benefits of making something visual is that you can keep it. Verbal language flies away. It disappears. Keeping visual information to review over and over helps students remember and understand.

Giving information to students with autism/AS in a concrete visual form helps them handle the many happenings during a day that can cause confusion or frustration. It gives them the structure necessary to better handle situations that are difficult for them, and helps them participate more independently in their life activities.

Best of all, visual strategies are not just helpful for individuals on the autism spectrum – they're beneficial for all kids and adults. Visual tools reinforce verbal instruction and provide a second channel for learning and retention. Now, that's how I spell S-U-C-C-E-S-S!

*Linda Hodgdon is the author of two best selling books, [Visual Strategies for Improving Communication and Solving Behavior Problems in Autism](#). She is featured in the award winning [Visual Strategies Workshop–Video Program](#). Linda is a popular presenter both nationally and internationally. For more information visit [www.LindaHodgdon.com](http://www.LindaHodgdon.com)*