Why use a visual schedule?

As teachers or parents working with children with disabilities, we often assume that the child "knows" the daily schedule. Do they really know? Think how lost you would be if someone took away your day timer, Palm Pilot or calendar? Would you "know" that your dental appointment is exactly 6 months after your last appointment without that friendly reminder from your dentist office?

Humans are visual creatures and children with disabilities often rely primarily on visual cues to gather information. Linda Hodgen (1995), states that: "A major function of communication is to give information. In the typical school or home environment:

- a majority of the information is given verbally
- it is frequently assumed that the student already knows or remembers specific information
- the assumption that students already know results in information not being given at all." (pg. 29).

There are many good reasons for using visual schedules with children who have disabilities. A visual schedule:

- provides structure and predictability (which can be VERY effective in decreasing undesirable behaviors, especially with children who have Autism Spectrum Disorder).
- makes abstract time concepts, such as "later", "next", or "last", more concrete.
- can be used to learn new vocabulary & language concepts. *(It is important to note that a visual schedule does not take the place of other supports such as an augmentative alternative communication system, visual choice making opportunities or environmental labeling.)*
- can help the child with unexpected changes in the regular schedule.
- can be used as a task analysis schedule to teach new skills.
- can help the child transition from one activity to the next.
- can increase independence!
- teaches the importance of organization.
- provides a point of reference for children with a poor attention span.
- helps make inclusion in the general education classroom more successful!
The following are examples of visual schedules and the many different application in which they can be used.

This is a clipboard schedule. This schedule is used during a regular education “circle time” meeting. The first icon is a visual cue for the student to “sit on your spot”, which was a rubber mat with a “spot” on it (see photo below). When a task or activity is completed, it is placed in the “finished” pouch.

Rubber mat for “sit on your spot” cue.

This picture shows several different visual cues in use. The row of pictures on the left side of the desk is used as a desk schedule for morning work activities. The picture at the top of the row indicates the current activity. Once the activity is completed, the picture card is placed in the green “finished” basket. The next picture on the schedule is then moved up, indicating it is time for the next activity.

It is important to have a designated “finished” spot for symbols. That lets the child know when an activity is over and it is time for a new activity.

The picture symbol on the seat reads, “sit” and is referred to when requesting the child to sit in his seat (a frequent reminder for the student who used this schedule).
Visual schedules can also be used as “reminders” for steps to be taken when completing a task. This photo shows reminders for completing a set of independent workstation activities. If the student forgets what to do next or becomes distracted from the task at hand, he can refer to the picture reminders. The picture reminders are also used by the teacher or aide to prompt the student to the next task or behavior (such as requesting for help).

This is a portion of a daily schedule that was created for a middle school student with Autism. This student is learning to tell time and self-monitors his schedule by referring to a digital watch. The student keeps his schedule in a small plastic binder and carries it with him everywhere. Once an activity is completed, he crosses it off his schedule. This schedule also helps the classroom aide, regular education teacher, special education teacher and other school personnel keep up with this very busy and mostly independent student.
This is a more complex wall schedule designed for a higher functioning child with Autism. It includes sets of word cards, color-coded for each day of the school week.

Each day’s cards are kept in a Ziploc bag, labeled with the day of the week, and stored next to the wall schedule.

The cards are numbered in the sequence in which they occur during the day. For example, the card at the top reads, “Put away back pack”, the second card reads, “check mail”. When the activity is competed, the card goes into the finished pocket at the bottom of the schedule.

At the end of each day, the student takes the cards out of the finished pocket and puts them back in the correct bag.

She then takes the next day’s cards and uses a guide to correctly lay out the cards in order, matching the number on the card to the number on the guide. After the teacher checks her work, the student moves the cards from the numbered guide to the wall schedule for the next day.

Not shown in this picture, are a basket of extra symbols, such as “party”, “assembly”, “tornado drill”, “visitor”, to add to the schedule as needed.

Visual schedules can evolve as the student learns new skills! The student who uses the word based schedule presented in the above example, used to use a schedule with Mayer-Johnson picture symbols. This functionally non-verbal student with severe autism learned to decode and read pre-primer and primer sight words during her 4th grade year. At that time, she seemed to prefer using a word-based schedule rather than a picture-based schedule. She let her teacher know that she preferred the word-based schedule when she started tearing up and throwing away her picture symbol schedule. Through trial and error, the word based schedule evolved to fit her current needs.
A “First/Then” schedule can be helpful when the student has a hard time staying on task. Oftentimes, the task is one that the student would rather avoid! In this case, “First play the drums in music class”. “Then you can play with your Tigger doll”. The second activity can be a student selected “reward” activity for completing the teacher selected “work” activity.

Once an activity is completed, the picture symbol goes inside the envelope, which has been laminated for durability and affixed with a tab of Velcro to keep the symbols inside.

This is an example of a portable notebook schedule. The child who uses this schedule is in and out of the general education classroom during the school day. He takes this schedule with him to therapy, to the resource room, to the playground, on field trips, everywhere! Every transition period of his day, from entering the school building to putting away his backpack, to washing his hands before lunch, is represented on his notebook schedule. The child who uses this schedule has severe autism, is functionally non-verbal, and has significant difficulties transitioning from one activity to the next. The extensive scheduling of daily activities helps to reduce this student’s behavioral outbursts and anxiety about changes in his daily routine.

Since the notebook is small, the schedule is broken up into “morning schedule” and “afternoon schedule”. The student’s aide sets up the morning schedule before the student arrives at school and sets up the afternoon schedule after lunch. Afternoon schedule symbols are stored on the inside cover of the notebook. Extra symbols, such as “party”, “assembly”, and “tornado drill” are stored on laminated pages inside the notebook. The student who uses this schedule required approximately five months of modeling and prompting before he started to use the schedule independently.
This is a photo schedule used with a Language Master. A Language Master is a commercially available reading tool that allows the teacher to record a word or sentence on a card with a magnetic recording strip. The card is slid through the Language Master and the word is read to the student. The student who uses this schedule takes the picture card off the schedule and slides it through the Language Master. The completed activity cards are stored in the purple “finished” basket.

This particular set-up is helpful for this student because she has severe vision impairment. Photos, rather than symbols, were used with this student because she requires a more concrete level of representation due to her lower level of cognitive functioning.

It is important to keep in mind the cognitive and language abilities of the student using the schedule. Children with lower levels of cognitive functioning often more easily understand photos and real objects to represent concepts or activities in their schedule. Line drawings, such as Mayer-Johnson picture symbols, pictographs and words can be used with children who have higher levels of cognitive functioning.

This is a close-up of one of the photos used in the schedule to represent lunch. The photo is labeled and very simple in composition. It includes a picture of a lunch tray and the word “lunch”. Distracters such as the lunch table and/or the lunchroom (which also doubled as the room for school assemblies) are left out of the picture. The goal is to keep the photograph as simple and concrete as possible.

Labeling the photograph helps peers and others interacting with the student to use the same word when referring to the picture. Also, exposure to and functionally using literacy concepts should be a high priority for all students, regardless of their perceived literacy abilities.
Creating a visual schedule for a child or classroom can be a daunting task. The following steps may help you get started.

- First, break the day into segments and name each segment. For example, “Put away backpacks and get settled”, “Morning Circle Time”, “Independent work stations”, etc..
- Next, decide how the segments will be represented. Will you use objects, photos, picture symbols, tactile symbols or words? The representation should be matched to the general needs and abilities of the person who will use the schedule. Don’t be afraid to use a symbol set that may appear to be slightly above the abilities of the student. For example, a student may initially have difficulty identifying specific picture symbols, but through modeling and frequent use, that student can learn and use picture symbols.
- Decide how the schedule will be presented; on a clipboard or notebook, mounted on the wall, attached to a desk, on the chalkboard, on the door. If you need a different schedule for different activities use a series of mini-schedules. It is OK to have more than one schedule, located in different places and used at different times during the day.
- Determine where the symbols will be placed once an activity is “finished”. Make sure you have a clearly identified place to put “finished” symbols.
- Use the schedule. Everyday. Make it a part of the child’s or classroom’s routine. Model how to use the schedule. Talk about what is happening, what has happened and what will happen by referring to the schedule. If part of the schedule is not working, change it.
- Most importantly, share your visual schedule success stories with your student’s parents and/or caregivers, and teach them how to use them at home!

For more information and ideas on *creating* and *using visual schedules*, check out the following websites.

- **http://www.dotolearn.com/** This website is packed with great, ready to use picture cards, worksheets and other educationally relevant activities.

- **http://www.dotolearn.com/picturecards/howtouse/schedule.htm** A link on the “Do To Learn” website listed above that specifically addresses the creation and use of visual schedules.

- **http://www.cesa7.k12.wi.us/sped/autism/structure/str11.htm** A web based article on visual schedules with detailed photos and helpful explanations.

- **http://www.pop.deltasd.bc.ca/acrobat/27visual.pdf** A persuasive and informative article on using visual schedules with children who have autism. Though geared for individuals with autism, the information is relevant for all individuals with developmental disabilities.

- **http://www.iidc.indiana.edu/irca/communication/choicebrd.html** A web based article contrasting and comparing the definition and use of visual schedules, choice boards, and augmentative-alternative communication systems.

- **http://www.setbc.org/projects/vss/docs/pg1.html** Another web based article on creating and using visual schedules.

- **http://www.usd.edu/cd/autism/topicpages/printer/Visual%20Schedules.pdf** A short article on visual schedules. Could be a good resource for introducing the topic to parents and/or teachers.

- **http://www.mayer-johnson.com** This company sells the software program, Boardmaker, and other software and materials that are used to make visual schedules.

- **http://www.ezbreez.com** A source for ready made visual schedule systems.