

INTRODUCTION

Receiving an autism spectrum disorder diagnosis is a life-changing event at any age or any stage of life. For parents, it changes their hopes, dreams and expectations for their child. It impacts the parents' relationship with each other, the family dynamic and relationships with extended family and friends.

Parents often feel overwhelmed in the beginning and want to do everything they can all at once. This can lead to frustration and burn out because autism is a lifelong journey and not a topic you can be knowledgeable about quickly. It takes time to adjust to the diagnosis, to find out what supports and strategies will work best for your child.

The first questions parents ask themselves are where do we start? What do we do now? What kind of supports and services are available, how do we find them, and how do we access services? The answers to these questions will take time, research, and community connections with other parents and professionals who are familiar with what is available. It is a process to set up this new way of life.

Choosing the right therapy and services can be confusing. There is a dizzying array of information about autism and what treatments/therapies work best. Other parents will want to give advice on how well something worked for their child. Medical professionals will have an opinion. Internet research, forums, and articles may also influence decisions. It is important to do what works for your family and your circumstances. Each family is unique with its own dynamic and rhythm. You will find your way. There will be some trial and error – this is normal and all part of the process.

Your child's autism diagnosis will need to be shared with others. Knowing about the diagnosis can lead to a better understanding of the individual by other people and get the right supports in place in an educational setting, community organization, living arrangement, and eventually - a job. Caregivers, friends, siblings and extended family members can often be more understanding and effective in supporting the individual when they are aware of autism.

With all of these new worries and adjustments, parents may forget about their own needs. Parents have to look after themselves too in order to have the energy for care and thinking clearly. Sleep deprivation is common for parents and can affect judgement, mood, decision making, and contribute to health conditions. Respite breaks need to be a priority to recharge. You have to do things for yourself that you enjoy and bring happiness. It can be simple things like reading a book or doing some yoga.

Finally, know that you can't do it all by yourself. It takes a village, a community, to help raise and support a child with autism. By creating a circle of services, support people, friends and finding other parents of children like yours, you will not feel so alone and isolated. While the autism journey is a winding path that lasts a lifetime, it is also a unique journey that makes life rich and interesting.

Sincerely,



Maureen Bennie

Director, Autism Awareness Centre Inc.



USING VISUAL SUPPORTS

VISUAL SUPPORTS FOR AUTISM: A STEP BY STEP GUIDE

People on the autism spectrum tend to learn best using visual supports rather than through auditory input. Seeing it, rather than saying it, helps the person retain and process information. [Temple Grandin](#), the most famous woman in the world with autism, describes being a visual thinker in her excellent book [Thinking in Pictures](#).

How can visual supports be used?

With visual supports you can:

1. Create daily/weekly schedules with visual blocks of time
2. Show sequential steps in a task such as a bedtime routine or getting dressed
3. Demonstrate units of time
4. Make a “to do” list
5. Aid communication for those who are less or non verbal
6. Offer choices

What exactly is a visual support?

Visuals supports can be pictures, objects, sign language or text. They can come in a variety of forms. Some examples of programs that generate visuals are:

Boardmaker (Mayer-Johnson) – This popular software generates Picture Communication Symbols (PCS) and other graphics. These drawings are line drawings and not actual photos. Boardmaker does not work for every child because some children do not understand what the line drawings mean.

Communicate: SymWriter (formerly Writing with Symbols) – A different approach to writing, reading and literacy development, this program is a talking word processor that matches symbols to words to help students of all ages and abilities increase comprehension and fluency. Writing activities challenge students with a focus on creating summaries, biographies, letters, persuasive papers, reports and reviews. A great tool for students with limited spelling abilities or those who have trouble accessing a keyboard, SymWriter comes equipped with symbol-supported grids for writing, making independent engagement in assignments and projects possible for all students.

Indiana Resource Center for Autism – Free visuals organized by topic.

PictureSET – A collection of downloadable visual supports that can be used by students for both receptive and expressive communication in the classroom, at home, and in the community. This searchable database allows you to find a wide range of useful visual supports for different curriculum areas, activities, and events. PictureSET resources are created and updated by dedicated professionals working with students in British Columbia.

Visual Suite DVD – This is a product that has thousands of photos in situations often encountered in everyday life, like chores, money, school supplies, what’s different and many more.

Can I make my own visual supports?

Some of these programs tend to be expensive and not everyone can afford them. An alternative to buying a pre-packaged product is to make your own visuals. You can achieve this in a number of ways:

- By taking photos with a digital camera
- Cutting out pictures from print media such as magazines or old calendars
- Dollar stores can be a great place to find inexpensive visuals.

A note of caution when taking photos – be sure to keep the background at a minimum and make the focal point the subject of the photo. If you take photos from too far away, the background tends to get busy looking and can become the focal point for people with autism.

There are also many apps that offer visual supports at low costs

Applications for iPad and iTouch are making visual supports more accessible than ever and at a low cost. The Autism Speaks [website](#) has a great list of available apps and what they are used for. If you're looking for a great book that reviews apps, try [Apps for Autism](#). Another excellent website for visuals is www.do2learn.com. A good article to read about visual supports and how to use them is [Learning Through Seeing and Doing](#) by Shaila Rao and Brenda Gagie.

What is the best way to use visual supports

There is a hierarchy to using visual supports. Start with matching an object to object, then object to picture, then picture to picture. You begin with using the actual object matching to the same object. Once that is mastered, then match an object to a picture. This helps the child understand that a picture can be a representation of an object. Finally, you can match a picture to a picture. I see people who do not use this progression and can't understand why the child doesn't understand a picture such as the ones generated by Boardmaker.

Here is the hierarchy for the visual supports themselves:

1. Object
2. Color photos
3. Black and white photos
4. Color drawing
5. Black and white drawing
6. Written word

I am a fan of using the written word with all visual supports because no one can predict when understanding/comprehension of the written word will begin. Reading is a gradual process that involves years of skill building so it's important to provide as much exposure to the printed word as possible. Some children read before they can speak, which was the case with my daughter. I discovered this quite by chance when Julia typed a Word document on the computer at age 4 with perfect spelling.

When do I stop using visual supports for my child with Autism?

I am often asked the question, “When do I fade the use of visual supports?” The answer is...you don't. All of us use some sort of visual tool to create schedules and keep ourselves organized. We use iPhones, daytimers, desk calendars, and checklists. Use these tools to create visual schedules for our folks on the spectrum because they create [predictability](#) which lessens anxiety.

Do you stop using your daytimer, calendar or iPhone? Do you shop without a list? The answer is no, so don't stop using visuals with people on the spectrum. You can change what you use as the child ages because it may no longer be appropriate. A teenager using a Velcro strip visual schedule taped to his desk may make him stand out from his peers, but an iTouch helps him be like everyone else.

One final note – just because a person on the autism spectrum is highly verbal or intelligent doesn't mean they don't need visual supports. I know an adult woman on the spectrum who lives successfully on her own, but keeps checklists all over her apartment on how to do laundry, dishes, and when to take out the garbage.

Visual supports help with learning, retaining information, communication, and expression. To quote my good friend Leslie Broun, “Auditory information is transient – visual information can be fixed and permanent.”

For further reading:

- ☰ [*Making Visual Supports Work in the Home and Community: Strategies for Individuals with Autism and Asperger Syndrome*](#)
- ☰ [*Visual Supports for People with Autism: A Guide for Parents and Professionals, 2nd. Edition*](#)
- ☰ [*Visual Support for Children With Autism Spectrum Disorders*](#)