

# ACT-NOW

## FACT SHEET 26

*Helping young children to communicate  
using visual supports*



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## FACT SHEET 26

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### Helping young children to communicate using visual supports

All children who receive a diagnosis of autism have problems with communication (see Fact sheet no. 4). This and the next four Fact sheets discuss the use of visual support systems and offer some ideas about their introduction and use.

Children with autism have difficulty using speech and language and also have difficulty understanding the spoken language of others and even the simplest sentences and instructions can be difficult for young children with autism to follow. Because of these problems in understanding, young children may be confused about:

- what is or isn't happening in their day
- why their routine has been changed
- being expected to shift from one activity to another
- being allowed to do some things but not others
- not always being allowed to do what they want to *when* they want to

Slow processing of verbal information also means that an instruction may come and go too quickly so that the child doesn't have time to understand the instruction and then respond to it. For young children with autism, problems communicating with others may lead to:

- difficulty getting their message across
- frustration because their attempts to communicate are not understood by others
- giving up because it's simply too hard

We *do* know that for most children with autism the area of visual perception is a relative strength. How many children with autism do you know who can work the control for the TV and VCR or know how to unlock the front door yet you have never taught them to do these things? Little children with autism learn by looking and watching. Because of this, visual supports can help us to communicate with them and them to communicate with us.

### What are visual supports?

Some examples of visual supports or visual communication tools are:

real objects	miniature objects
photographs	line drawings
picture symbols	choice boards
activity schedules	daily schedules

## How and when to use visual supports

- Planning for the introduction of visual supports requires a thorough understanding of the child's abilities. Consultation with a Speech Pathologist and members of a multi-disciplinary team of professionals working with the child is highly recommended. Each child's abilities and communication needs must be carefully assessed **before** a visual support system is introduced. Importantly, communication needs will vary according to the setting the child is in. For example *how* and *what* a child needs to communicate and *with whom* will be very different at home, Early Intervention, Child Care or Pre-school.
- In order for the child to effectively use the visual support system, it should be introduced across different environments and with a range of people. It is vital that everyone interacting with the child consistently uses the same approach.
- For successful introduction and effective use of visual supports, the child needs to understand what the object/picture/word represents, and how to use it to communicate a need or understand a request.

### Pre requisite skills the child needs include:

1. the ability to attend to the visual stimuli (object, picture etc)
2. the ability to interpret the meaning of the stimulus
3. the *desire* to communicate with others!

There is a hierarchy of complexity in visual supports. The most easy to understand and use are real objects, followed by miniatures of real objects, photographs of the real objects, line drawings, symbols and finally the written word.

See below an example of the communication skill – Choosing an activity. Bubble Play is the activity of choice and the visual support hierarchy from easiest to most difficult/abstract is described.

### Useful websites and books:

Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (<http://card.ufl.edu/visual.htm>)

Scope ([http://www.scopevic.org.au/therapy\\_crc.html](http://www.scopevic.org.au/therapy_crc.html))

Do2Learn (<http://www.do2learn.com>)

*Teaching Children with Autism: Strategies to Enhance Communication and Socialization* by Kathleen Quill, New York: Delmar Publishers Inc., 1995.

## Making choices - using the visual support hierarchy – Bubbles

Easiest to understand



### Real object:

The child selects the bubble wand as an indication they would like to play with the bubbles.

- requires very little interpretation,
- is useful for a very young child,
- can be used with a child with significant development delay

### Photo of the Real Object:

The child selects the photo of the bubble jar if they would like to play with the bubbles.

- requires a child to understand that 3D objects can be represented in 2D form.
- does not require the child to understand that bubble jars can look different from each other.
- does not require skills of generalization

### Generic line drawing of the object:

The child selects the generic line drawing if they would like to play with the bubbles.

Generic line drawings require a child to understand:

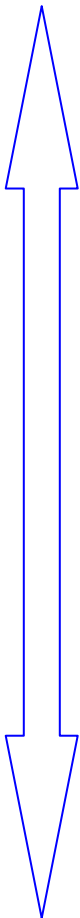
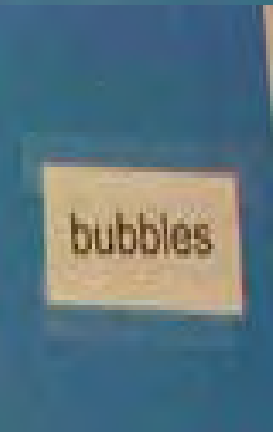
- 3D objects can be represented in 2D form,
- an object can come in many different forms (size, colour, shape),
- one picture can be used to represent each of these different forms of an object;
- skills of generalization.

Line drawings are accompanied with the written word, to encourage the child to develop a bank of sight words that can be read in order to introduce the next phase of the hierarchy.

### The written word:

The child selects the written word “bubbles” to play with the bubbles.

- This is a visual support in its most abstract form.
- There is no picture involved for the child to refer to.
- The child needs to be able to read



Most difficult to understand