



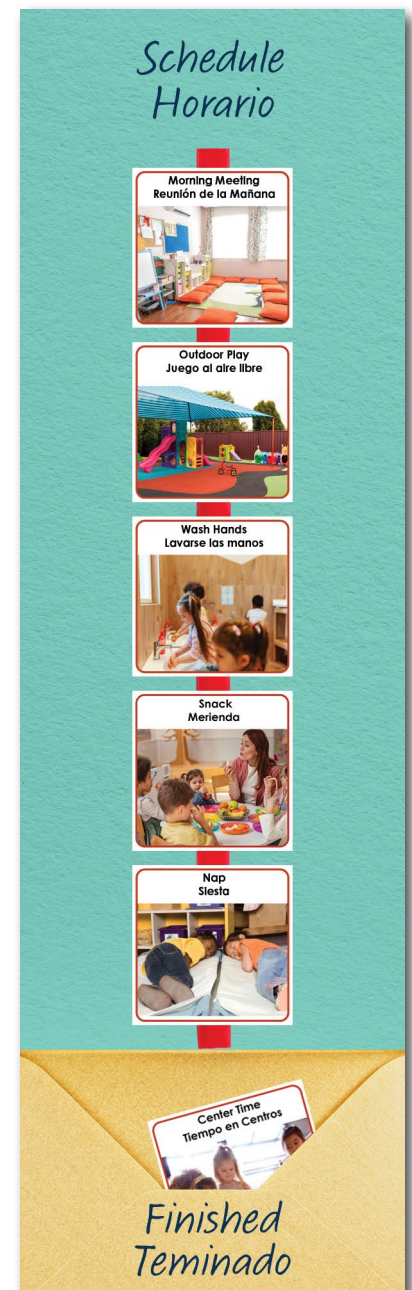
Using Visuals to Support Children in the Early Learning Environment

Introduction

Visual supports can help children learn new skills and prevent challenging behavior. They also help children to follow routines and understand what is happening “now” and what will happen “next.” Visuals serve as reminders for verbal directions and provide the support needed to improve a child’s understanding and ability to communicate. For many children, visual supports are most beneficial when used with their preferred language (e.g., home language, sign language). Use the following templates and examples to develop visual supports that work for the children in your environment.



Visual Schedule



Visual Schedules

Visual schedules inform the child about when activities or routines will happen. Using a visual schedule provides young children with predictability (i.e., they know what activity or routine is coming and when) and consistency (i.e., the schedule of activities or routines is the same). Visual schedules help increase children's expressive and receptive language skills and provide lasting reminders after the verbal directions have been given.

How to Create a Visual Schedule

1. **List the major activities** that occur in your setting. Use this [resource](#) to help organize the list of activities.

2. **Find a picture or a visual representation** of each activity on the list.

There are several options you can choose when selecting visual images. The visuals can be computer-generated images, cartoons, or photographs of the materials, spaces, or activities in your setting. When choosing images, pick ones that are easy for everyone to understand, keeping in mind the children's developmental level. For young children, we strongly recommend using photographs of what the activity looks like in your setting (e.g., naptime, large group).

TIP! When you take a photo to use as a visual, place the item or object on a solid, high-contrast background. Take photographs from the child's perspective. It is okay to have children's backs in the photos. This will ensure that the visuals can be used over time as membership in the environment changes.

3. **Use written text** along with the visual to promote reading. Written text should include the home languages of children in the setting.

4. **Preparing the visuals.** Remember to make the "picture" sturdy, easy to handle, and durable. Print the visual on cardstock or glue it to a file folder, then cover it with contact paper or laminate.

5. **Post the schedule.** If space allows, arrange the visuals in the sequence of the schedule from left to right. Horizontal orientation will help prepare the child for reading. However, arranging the visuals vertically or from top to bottom is also fine. Place the schedule at eye level of children in a location where you can reference the schedule often (e.g., morning meeting area).

TIP! Schedules work best when children can see when they are done with an activity. Here are some ideas:

- Create a pocket at the bottom or end of the display representing "finished" or "all done." When the activity is finished, place visuals in the envelope or pocket.
- Make a schedule with visuals that can be removed and manipulated.
- If your schedule is a book format that travels with you, turn the page.
- Use a placeholder (like a clothespin or arrow) that can move from visual to visual.



How to Use

- ▶ **Teach children how to use the schedule** by explaining and demonstrating how to use the pictures.
- ▶ **Review each visual activity** represented for that day's schedule (preferably during the morning meeting or the first large group activity).
- ▶ **Refer to the visual schedule throughout the day** (e.g., "We just woke up from nap time. Let's go check the schedule to see what is next.").
- ▶ **Talk about the schedule** (e.g., "Look, we just washed our hands. Now it is time for breakfast!"). Provide verbal directions and ask children questions about their day (e.g., "Now that the morning meeting is over, what are we going to do next?").
- ▶ **Make it active.** Along with verbal direction, provide some visual direction to support understanding the passage of time. Teach children how they can indicate when an activity is completed.
 - Remove pictures from the visual schedule when activities are completed.
 - Use an arrow or a marker that moves across the visual schedule when activities are completed.
 - Have children flip the card over or remove it from the schedule and put it in the "finished" pocket, depending on how your schedule is set up.
- ▶ **Involve children.** Use a helper role for children to manipulate the schedule or move the marker to show what is coming next. Ask children what is coming next and call on children who need additional practice to review the visual schedule or to check for understanding.

Changes to the Schedule

- ▶ Make sure to change the visuals on the schedule as needed. For example, if it is raining and you can't go outside to play, remove the outside play visual from the schedule and replace it with what will happen that day. Review the change with all children and give additional instructions for children needing extra support.

TIP! Remember, the more specific the visual is to the child and your daily routines, the more likely you will be able to teach the steps in a way that ensures the child can follow the routine.

First/Then Boards

First/Then boards can be used for a variety of reasons. They can be used to:

- ▶ Assist with the transition from one activity to another. For example, "First clean up, then play outside."
- ▶ Break routines into smaller steps. For example, "Go to the bathroom and wash your hands, then get your water bottle for a snack."
- ▶ Encourage children to complete tasks they might not enjoy doing to do a more enjoyable activity that will follow. For example, "First, clean up, then go outside."



Making a First/Then Board

1. **Select the visuals or photographs** that represent the activities you need. Use this resource for [transition visual cards](#) (also in [Spanish](#)).
2. **Cut out the cards.** Print cards on cardstock, attach them to thicker paper, laminate them, or make them sturdy by covering them with clear tape or clear contact paper.
3. **Make the boards.** Print the board templates provided on pages 6, or get creative and make your own.
 - Use a file folder, a large (4x6) index card, or a piece of cardboard. You want it large enough to hold several of the visuals.
 - Divide the board into two sections by making a vertical line to make a FIRST section and a THEN section. Label one section “First” and the other section “Then.”
4. **Attach cards.** If available, use small pieces of Velcro on the back of the pictures and the board.



How to Use

- ▶ **Try it out.** As you use the First/Then board with the child, place a preferred activity or item on the “then” side of the board. This will increase the likelihood that the child will complete the activities on the “first” side of the board.
- ▶ **Flip the picture over,** as each activity is completed, to indicate that the activity is “finished.” If you place a strip of Velcro on the front of the picture card, you can flip it over and stick it to the board.
- ▶ **Celebrate!** Acknowledge and provide feedback to the child after they complete the “first” activity and are moving to what is coming next (e.g., “You washed your hands and now we get to eat our yummy snack! You were being so responsible!” or “You put on your shoes and now we get play outside. Thanks for being such a great helper!”).



Making Your Own Visual Cards

It's easy to make your own!

1. **Identify the steps** in your routine that need visuals.
2. Using the blank cards provided on page 7, you can:
 - draw a picture
 - attach a photo

TIP! You might want to add more specific visuals that can help the child. For example, if the child receives speech therapy, take a picture of the child's speech therapist. If the child rides a bus home from school, take a picture of a bus you can use as a visual for going to and from school.



3. **Label the visual.** Write on the template, or if using the electronic template, type in the name of the routine. For example, if you drew a picture of going for a walk, then label the picture, "go for a walk." If the child is learning English, label the photo in the home language and English so that you will have a reminder for how to refer to the activity on the visual.
4. **Cut out the new visual** and add it to your visual schedule or first-then board.

TIP! Remember, the more specific the visual is to the child and your daily routines, the more likely you will be able to teach the steps in a way that ensures the child can follow the routine.

Beyond the Schedule

In this tip sheet, we provided ideas related to visual supports and schedules. Visuals can be helpful in your setting in a variety of ways. Explore the resources listed below for other ideas on using visuals to encourage and support children's engagement and learning.

- ▶ <https://challengingbehavior.org/implementation/classroom/practical-strategies/> and
- ▶ <https://headstart.gov/children-disabilities/article/visual-supports>

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Primero

Then
Después

First

Then

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