



# Visual supports

This page is for educators who want to create a visual support. Visual supports (commonly known as visuals) are any visual aid that supports a learner to make their way through the day.

Visuals are one tool that could be used by educators to support an inclusive and accessible environment for all learners and provide extra support to learners with additional needs.

As educators we know that within our learning setting there will be learners with a diverse range of abilities, each one unique. It's up to us to find strategies and supports to help each and every one of them to learn on the same basis as their peers, as defined in the [Disability Standards for Education](#).

To use visual supports successfully for individual learners as part of a personalised plan, you need to explicitly teach them to the intended learners, implement them with fidelity (this means with commitment, consistency and for the purpose they were intended to be used) and keep using them until the learners understand the concept or skill.

## About visual supports

Visual supports are both communication and teaching aids. They can be anything that provides a visual clue to learners, such as:

- pictures
- photos
- images
- words
- text
- tangible objects
- key word sign
- gestures
- assistive technologies.

They are used to provide the learner with information about routines, activities, directions, behavioural expectations and more. Depending on the learner and the situation, visual supports can help learners to understand and communicate more effectively, learn new skills, and increase their independence.

Visual supports can be used to develop a range of skills such as:

- social
- communication
- behaviour
- play
- safety
- cognitive
- preschool or school readiness
- academic
- motor planning
- adaptive concerns.

Visual supports can be used to achieve SMARTAR goals such as:

- successful transitions
- communication
- predictability
- reducing inappropriate behaviours associated with a task or transition
- increased independence and on task behaviour
- increased autonomy
- better understanding of a task, activity or environment
- less distractions
- safety
- more social interactions
- supporting appropriate play skills
- clarity of behaviour expectation
- support verbal instructions about what to do and what comes next
- present verbal information in a way that focuses on key elements.

Visual supports can be used to support aspects of quality differentiated teaching practice and targeted support across the [3 waves of intervention](#). They can be used across all settings and year levels and are an [evidence-based intervention](#) when used appropriately for students with Autism.

## Types of visual supports

You can create 3 different types of visual supports: visual boundaries, visual cues and visual schedules.

## Visual boundaries

Visual boundaries are when you create a visual line that separates different activities or indicates the outer limit of something. They are often used to increase on-task behaviours and develop understanding and skills around safety.

Visual boundaries could include:

- separating zones for different tasks with lines on the floor or furniture
- covering equipment that's not needed for the current task
- using a red line on the ground to indicate no entry.

## Visual cues

Visual cues include labels, graphic organisers, choice boards, and visual or procedural instructions. In some circumstances they can increase the learner's ability to organise thoughts and concepts and help with task completion, independence and understanding expectations.

Visual cues are often used in Deaf education to explicitly teach the relationships or connections between concept and terms.

## Visual schedules

Visual schedules are a collection of visuals that communicate a series of activities or the steps of a specific task. They're often used to help with understanding, managing daily events and transitions. Examples of visual schedules include:

- a whole-group schedule
- daily timetables
- individual schedules
- change cards
- a first-then schedule.

## Benefits of visual supports for learners

Learners with additional needs can benefit from visual supports to help with skill development in specific areas, depending on the individual learner and their needs as they progress towards independence. Using visual supports for all learners is simple but often overlooked, underrated or not implemented with fidelity or consistency.

Learners who might benefit from visual supports in the right circumstances include those with:

- autism
- intellectual disability
- ADHD
- sensory processing difficulties
- developmental language disorder
- behaviour disorder
- hearing loss
- specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia, dyscalculia and dysgraphia
- a developmental trauma background
- English as an additional language or dialect (EALD).

## Creating visual supports

The format and level of representation in visual supports should meet the individual needs of the learner and their comprehension or level of understanding.

### Elements of a visual support

When creating visual supports, consider and plan the following:

- visual items you'll use – objects, photos, pictures, words, line drawings, pictures with or without the learner depicted, tape, furniture
- format – label, list, grid, objects in a tray, video, poster
- location – located in a predictable area for the learner, for example on their desk, or could be:
  - always in the same learning space
  - transported to different learning areas
  - available in all learning spaces and home
  - different version for different locations
- length – 1 item, 2 to 3 steps, list of options
- how the schedule will be manipulated – wiped off, ticked off, Velcro dots, flipped over, moved to a different pile
- size and visual contrast suitable for learners with vision impairment
- instigator – learner, educator

- next steps for the learner to get support – learner asks, learner presents card, predetermined additional supports to access, educator provides verbal direction, (least restrictive see [prompt hierarchy \(Word 1.33MB\)](#), refers to school but also applies to preschool)
- reward for success – verbal, sticker or other object, reward chart, choice of task, none.

You should also:

- incorporate the learner’s interests and cognitive ability
- ensure the visual supports are age appropriate
- keep the visual supports or collection of supports simple and consistent, using the same words, fonts or images
- consider how you will implement, monitor and review the supports. This may involve liaising with parents, caregivers, private providers and the learner themselves.

## Create the visual support

If your visual support uses objects, furniture, tape, paint or covers, collect those items and put them in place.

If your visual support is a printed sheet, a poster or similar you can:

- create it using [Boardmaker](#) (software available to purchase)
- create it using software that you have available to you – like Microsoft Word or Canva – that has libraries of images that you can freely use and allow you to upload photos.

Templates and examples:

- [Visual supports – step by step guide \(PDF 372KB\)](#)
- [Visual schedules](#)
- [An introduction to visual supports \(PDF 1.71MB\)](#)
- [Getting started: using visual system to promote communication \(PDF 4.3MB\)](#)
- [Visual supports for routines, schedules, and transitions \(PDF 8.4MB\).](#)

## Teach the visual support

Explicitly teach learners how to use the visual support until they can:

- attribute meaning to the visual
- carry out the task or behaviour with mastery
- transfer this knowledge across different settings and situations.

The ultimate goal is the learner completing the task or behaviour independently, and if appropriate without the visual support.

Explicitly teach the individual or group of learners about the visual support and how it should be used. This may involve modelling or demonstration.

## Support and training providers

- [Special Education Resource Unit \(SERU\)](#) provides:
  - training and development in visual supports for school services officers (SSOs), early childhood workers (ECWs), educators and leaders
  - resources you can borrow from the collection
  - advice and support in making and implementing visuals
  - training in using technology to make visual supports, including Boardmaker
  - Autism focused intervention resources and modules (AFIRM) training modules (you'll need to create a free account to access them):
    - [Visual cues](#)
    - [Visual supports](#)
- [National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorder module – Visual supports \(PDF 572kb\)](#)
- [West Adelaide Special Education Centre outreach program](#)
- Autism Awareness – [Visual supports for autism: a step by step guide](#)
- InclusionEd– [Use visual schedules to help students stay on task](#) (refers to school but also applies to preschool)

## Contact

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