# Visual Strategies: 25 Reasons to Use Visual Strategies

Visual strategies are things we SEE. We can call them visual tools or visual supports. We use visual tools to accomplish a purpose. Perhaps we use something visual to help a student understand a situation. Maybe we provide a visual prompt so a student can accomplish a task more independently. There are so many possibilities.

**Think of the PURPOSE of a visual tool.**
Defining the student's NEEDS guides the decision about what kind of tool to use. Visual tools can range from a low tech photo or something written on a piece of paper to high tech tools like iTouch or iPad with Apps. Identifying the purpose of a visual tool helps us know what to use and how to use it.

Is your school or home environment set up to provide the visual support your students can benefit from?

How many of these functions are accomplished in your environment with visual tools? As you look at the list, count how many ways your students currently receive visual support.

**1. Establish attention**
Looking at something can help students establish attention better than just listening. Once they have focused their attention, the rest of the communication message can get in.

**2. Give information**
How do students get information to answer the who, what, why, where, when questions?

**3. Explain social situations**
The social world can be confusing. People are moving, changing & unpredictable. Giving social information by writing it down helps students understand.

**4. Give choices**
How do students know what the options are? What is available? What is not available?

**5. Give structure to the day**
Creating a schedule tells what is happening or what is not happening. Giving students the big picture reduces anxiety.

**6. Teach routines**
Following multiple steps in a routine will be easier when the student can SEE what they are. They will learn a routine faster when they are guided with visual supports so they don't make a lot of mistakes.

**7. Organize materials in the environment**
Where are the things we need? Is it clear where to put supplies away when it is clean up time?

**8. Organize the space in the environment**
Can the student identify his own space to work or play or sit? Which parts of the environment can he use and which parts are "off limits?"

**9. Teach new skills**
Learning to operate a new toy or piece of equipment. Learning a new task or academic skill.

**10. Support transitions**
Stopping one activity to start another. Moving from one environment to another. Anything that involves a shift or change.

**11. Stay on task**
Remembering what the current activity is and staying involved with it until it is completed.

**12. Ignore distractions**
Helping students consciously focus their attention on desired activities or interactions.

**13. Manage time**
How long is 5 minutes or one hour? How much time is there before a transition in the schedule? Time is invisible. Timers and clocks turn time into something students can SEE.

**14. Communicate rules**
People presume students know the rules. That is often not true. Perhaps they don't remember. Or they don't understand. Or they get too impulsive. Etc., etc.

**15. Assist students in handling change**
Preparing for something that is going to change. Preparing students when something will be different from what they normally expect can prevent lots of problems.

**16. Guide self-management**
Students need to learn how to manage their behavior by making acceptable choices when they get anxious or encounter a problem.

**17. Aid memory**
Remembering what to do or when to do it. Remembering what something is called or what someone's name is. (Think about how many ways you provide cues for yourself!)

**18. Speed up slow thinking**
Some students have lots of information in their brains, but it takes them a very long time to access it. Visual cues can speed that process.

**19. Support language retrieval**
Did you ever have an experience where you know someone's name but you just can't remember it? Or you know what something is but can't recall the word? Once you hear it or see it you instantly remember. (The older we are, the worse it becomes!) Students can experience the same challenges in remembering.

**20. Provide structure**
Structure means organized and predictable. Strive for an environment that provides visual organization and information.

**21. Learn vocabulary**
Create a personal dictionary with pictures and words of important vocabulary: names of people, favorite toys or videos or activities or places. Students will learn that information when they can access it over and over.

**22. Communicate emotions**
Students demonstrate a variety of emotions with their actions. Translating those responses into pictures or written language gives an opportunity to explain, clarify or validate their experience.

**23. Clarify verbal information**
What I understood might not be what you meant. Making it visual helps clarify our conversation. It eliminates the confusion.

**24. Organize life information**
Think of phone numbers, calendars, cooking instructions, shopping lists, social security numbers, appointments, etc.

**25. Review & remember**
One of the greatest benefits of making something visual is that you can keep it. Verbal language flies away. It disappears. Keeping visual information to review over and over helps students remember and understand.

Giving information to students in a concrete visual form helps them handle the many happenings during a day that can cause confusion or frustration. It gives them the structure necessary to better handle situations that are difficult for them.

Using visual strategies provides a way for students to participate more appropriately and independently in their life activities.

Count the ways that your students receive visual support consistently in their communication environments. Did you think of any new ideas to try?

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