Cynthia Miller-Lautman, OT

Visuals and Visual Schedules

1. Visuals and visual schedules are especially helpful in getting clients to follow rules or to follow routines better, or more independently. Talk to the client and/or family to find out what situations are the hardest for them. Start by supporting the client in using visuals targeting one or two specific challenges only.

2. For some clients, a hand drawn picture is enough to support them. Other clients might need a real picture of the actual object (example, a picture of their own bed). The higher the level of cognitive functioning of the client, the less specific to the client's life the photos need to be. The hierarchy of visuals, from easiest to hardest to understand is as follows: picture of actual object from client's life (i.e. real picture of their own bed), real picture of object (i.e. real picture of any bed), cartoon picture, hand drawn picture. If a client is struggling to successfully use visuals, you may need to change the type of visual presented.

3. For many clients, the exact picture used doesn't matter as much as the words you will choose to say to describe the picture. For instance, a picture of a rain coat can be used to mean "rain coat" if you choose to name the picture using these words when you speak to the client. Or it could be chosen to represent any coat or even "hang your coat up", if you choose. What is important is to always pair the same picture with the same words, so that the client can easily learn what the picture represents.

4. Cognitively, it is easier for clients to understand visual schedules where pictures are placed from top to bottom than ones where pictures are placed from left to right. If a client is struggling with a visual schedule that has been placed horizontally, try reorganizing the pictures vertically.

5. For most clients, it is important that there be a way for the client to mark that he/she has finished each step of the visual schedule. This could be by using Velcro on the visual schedule and having the client place each picture into an envelope when completed. It could be done by using an erasable marker and having the client draw an X over each picture, as the steps are completed. Alternatively, it could be done by placing an "all done" visual (with sticky tack) onto each picture, as the task is done.

6. If the visual schedule you are using has empty spots, use a "no" picture (an X) to fill the empty spots. This can otherwise be confusing to clients.

7. Blank laminated visuals and an erasable marker can be used to draw a picture in a situation where you don't have a picture to represent the challenging you are experiencing with a client. In a pinch, plain paper and a pencil can also work for many clients.

8. Use "uh-oh" pictures (could be a picture of someone scratching their head, a question mark, etc.) to show when something unexpected has happened. Take this picture and put it on top of the picture of the activity that has to change. For example, if the client was supposed to go to the park, but it has now started to rain, placing an "uh oh" picture on top of the park picture will help the client adapt to this change more easily.

9. A lanyard with a key ring can be used to keep the most frequently used pictures on it, for on-the-go situations. This is ideal for when families will be leaving the home or for a change of caregivers.

10. When using a first/then board, be sure the first item is always a task and that the second is always a reward. Get a list of things that are highly motivating to the client, either from the client or his/her family. Using first/then boards will not work if the reward is not something the client would really want to work towards earning.

11. Clients may likely need ongoing support to help trouble shoot the challenges they run into when trying to implement visuals. It is important to assign someone to directly support the family and to reach out to the family regularly to help talk through the challenges they are running into so that their use of visuals can be successful.

12. All sorts of different challenges can be supported by using visuals and visual schedules. Be imaginative in your use of them! Try to see things from the client's perspective to help guide you on what might be needed to help the client's functioning.