
# Aspect structured supports guide

aspect
Autism Spectrum Australia

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# Contents

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## About structured supports

Structured teaching is a strengths-based framework for supporting an Autistic person's understanding of the world around them and building their independence.

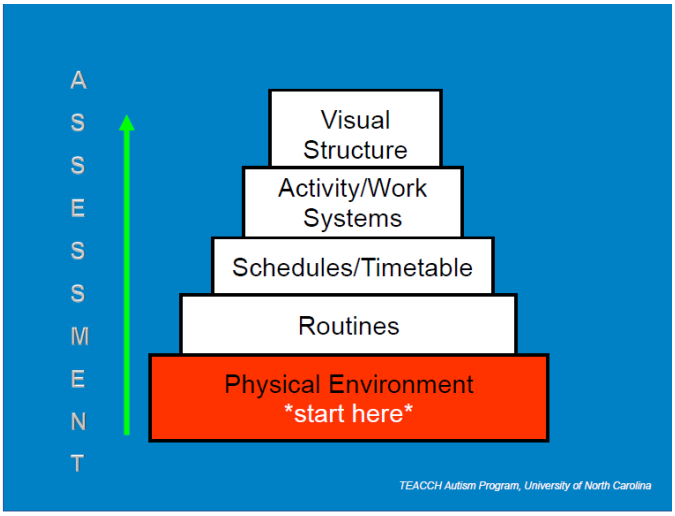


*Figure 1: The structured supports framework*

Structured supports involve ongoing assessment of the five core components of the framework:

1. Physical organisation
2. Routines
3. Schedules
4. Work systems, also known as activity systems
5. Visual structure.

The essential components for an Aspect staff member's approach to the development and implementation of structured supports are:

- understanding the person they are working with
- using the individual's visual strengths and interest in visual details to develop emerging skills
- including the person's interests, preferences and motivations in structure provided to increase engagement and learning
- using visual structure to support the person to understand expectations
- structuring the environment and activities in ways that are more meaningful to the individual
- providing visual structure to support self-initiated use of meaningful communication
- developing an individualised structured supports plan which involves ongoing assessment and restructure where and when necessary.

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## Implementing structured supports – observe, structure, teach and restructure

For all situations when supporting a person to gain greater independence in skills across different contexts, it is important that the following steps be followed when implementing structured supports.

1. **Observe** an environment, task or interaction. Are there any supports already in place that are/are not helping? If support is required, (starting with physical organisation) assess which components of the structured supports framework requires structure to enable the person to engage more successfully.

    - What are you noticing that indicates more support is required?
    - What are the clues that tell you the person needs help?

2. **Structure** the environment, task or situation. Think about what it is the person is struggling with that has resulted in support being required.

    - Can the person see what they are required to do?
    - Can the person see how to initiate or finish a task or interaction?
    - Can the person see what the next step or activity is?
    - Is the current structure individualised to the person's strengths, interests and support needs?

3. **Teach** the person how to use the structure provided. Once this is mastered, the structure is something that can be used to support the person across a range of contexts.

4. **Restructure** existing structured supports that are observed to be ineffective.

Where possible, make changes to contexts one at a time. If too many contexts are changed at once (working in different areas, interacting with different people, using different materials), the person may not be able to generalise a skill.

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# Structured supports framework

## Assessment

Implementation of structured supports starts with a comprehensive knowledge of the person. The Five Point Star framework can be used by staff and the individual to understand the perspective of the Autistic person, how they experience the world, and how best to support them.

*Table 1: Five Point Star information*

| Five Point Star comment | EXAMPLE: What does this assessment tell us about the structured supports that could be used for this person? |
|---|---|
| ***I like real pictures*** (when presenting information to me). | • Labels in the environment should include photographs.<br>• Routines where possible can be represented through photos.<br>• Schedule could include photographs of the location areas lessons will occur in.<br>• The work system/activity system could include photos (this could be on a work list).<br>• A picture of the finished product and/or the steps involved in the task could help the student understand instruction of the task.<br>• Photos of equipment needed could be included to support the student to know what they need to complete the task. |
| ***The things that keeps me motivated is Deadpool.***<br>***I love Deadpool.***<br>***I like the Indominus Rex.*** | • Deadpool could be incorporated into the student's schedule and work system to support engagement and motivation, for example images on schedule, work list consisting of Deadpool characters.<br>• The schedule for the student should have predictable access to a high interest activity throughout their day, such as Deadpool and dinosaurs. |

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| | |
|---|---|
| ***I expect it to be noisy at school. Things like noises make me distracted.***<br>***I like looking at entertainment, like when kids act out. I am attracted to that.***<br>***I do need noise-cancelling headphones.*** | • The physical organisation of the room/space considers the needs of the student by providing a quiet space.<br>• There is immediate access to sensory supports (headphones) in the student's space.<br>• The position of a work space for the person could be facing towards a wall or barrier to support minimising distractions.<br>• A reminder is placed on the student's timetable to take headphones to places that are noisy, such as the playground or canteen.<br>• Choice is provided in the schedule of where the student might like to go for their leisure time, such as the playground or library. |
| ***I notice when things are different*** (eye for detail). | • Routines are visually displayed so everyone has a shared expectation.<br>• Use highlighting and numbering steps to make important and/or relevant information stand out.<br>• Forewarning of upcoming changes can be provided on the student's schedule or work list. |

Ongoing assessment is the key to increased engagement, independence and generalisation of skills. Assessment of Structured Supports should always start with how the environment is physically organised.

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## Physical organisation

Physically organising an environment to consider an Autistic person's strengths in, and preference for, visual detail and areas of difference, can increase:

- understanding of the expectations for an environment (such as where to sit or stand)
- organisation skills and reducing environmental sources of distraction.

Physical organisation shows which activities occur in specific areas and what the expectations are for a specific area.


*Figure 2: Environmental supports define where to sit or stand*

To effectively support understanding within an environment, staff need to consider how the physical environment organisation is individualised for the person they are supporting/teaching.

Think about how the person's play, leisure, work spaces and/or areas in the home are organised.

- Is it visually clear what activities happen in specific areas (for example, cushions placed on the floor to indicate a space to sit)?
- What seating options are available?
- Will the person be more organised if materials and spaces are organised in a meaningful way for them (for example, labels are placed on containers, images of high interest on playmat, their first language rather than English is used to label spaces in a room)?

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- Will the person be more successful in an activity if play or leisure items are set up on a table with a chair?
- How can visual and auditory distractions be minimised?
- Is there a space that would be more comfortable for the person (for example, an outdoors program is held at a park with less people, or going to a café or the shops at a quiet time when there are less customers, providing a desk in a classroom away from the students who are 'chatty')?
- Will the person be distracted sitting close to others?
- Will the person be more engaged and focused if permitted the use of headphones to reduce auditory distraction?
- Is there a quiet space?


*Figure 3: Labels in an environment support organisation skills*

*Figure 4: Physical organisation makes clear expectations of a space*

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If staff are not able to fully adjust the environment to support the individual needs or preferences (such as when in the community), staff can support participants visually to understand the expectations for specific areas. For example, when a person is learning to purchase a drink from a café, staff might support the person to understand where the order is placed and payment made. Similarly, when participating in a bowling outing, staff can support the person visually to understand where they can wait for their turn to bowl and where they stand when bowling.

The Structured Supports Overview can be used to document individualised Physical Organisation for a person being supported.

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## Routines

A routine is a set of actions performed regularly and in a familiar way. We all rely on routines. This is because the more predictable something is, the more organised and calmer we feel. Routines allow us to complete actions more easily, saving attention for more complex situations.

Routines are regular sequences of actions which help people make sense of their world.


*Figure 5: Morning routine*

Routines are also helpful strategies for supporting a person to understand expectations and predict events. Through routines a person can begin to make sense of their world.

Routines:

- show how someone's world is organised
- decrease anxiety
- support sequencing and organisation skills
- increase skill development
- support participating in a conversation as an equal conversational partner
  support understanding of social roles and what takes place in different contexts (for example, talking to a friend versus talking to a teacher)
- increase self-monitoring for different contexts:
    - *Do I have the right clothes on for this situation?*
    - *Is there food in my teeth?*
    - *Is my face clean?*

Figure 6: Visual routines can support self-monitoring

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An Autistic person may develop their own routines, or become comfortable with routines provided. It is important for staff to understand what is helpful and motivating about these routines, especially when developing, reviewing and changing routines. Natural interests and motivations should be encouraged, and where possible routines should be developed in partnership with the person and or their family/support network.

To support a person to understand expectations of a task, interaction or activity and their ability to be flexible, it is important that routines are varied in the home, school, work and/or social settings.

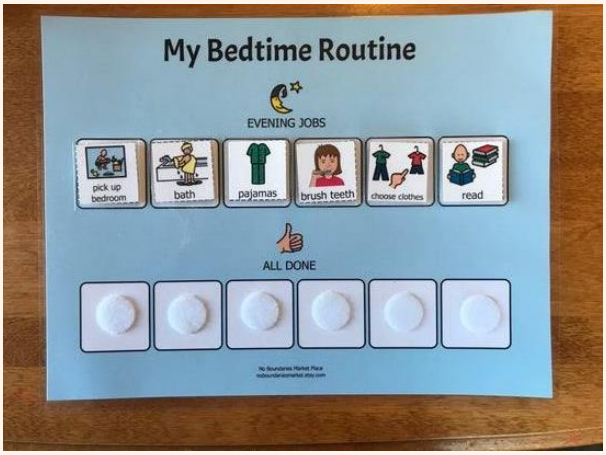
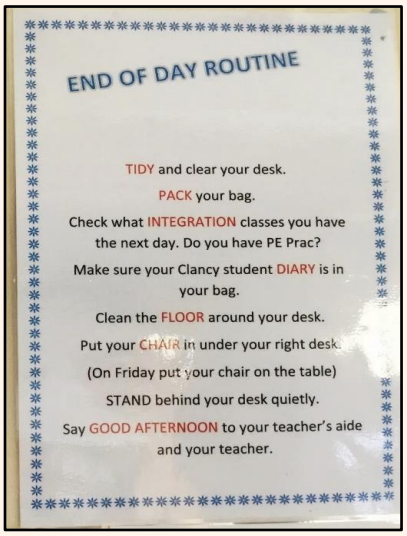




*Figure 7: Home routines*



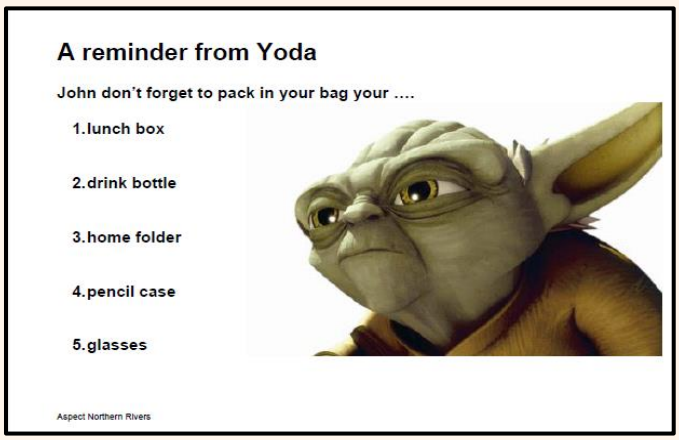




*Figure 8: School routines*

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The table below shows a list of things to consider when structuring routines.

*Table 2: Routines review checklist*

| Review of routines | Yes/No | Comments |
|---|---|---|
| Routines are built around daily activities. | | |
| Routines have been individualised. | | |
| Routines are built around concepts being taught. | | |
| Routines incorporate communication goals. | | |
| Routines include social situations. | | |
| Routines are in place for self-monitoring for different contexts. | | |
| Changes in routine are indicated visually. | | |

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## Schedules/timetables

A visual schedule is a sequence of activities, which when understood makes the day more predictable. A schedule moves a person through physical spaces and is a great way to prepare a person for the day ahead and changes in the day. The more predictable a day is, the less anxiety a person will feel. A schedule shows a person where and when something will occur and in what sequence, and it can teach flexibility by forewarning a person of changes to the day.

The more predictable a day is, the less anxiety a person will feel.

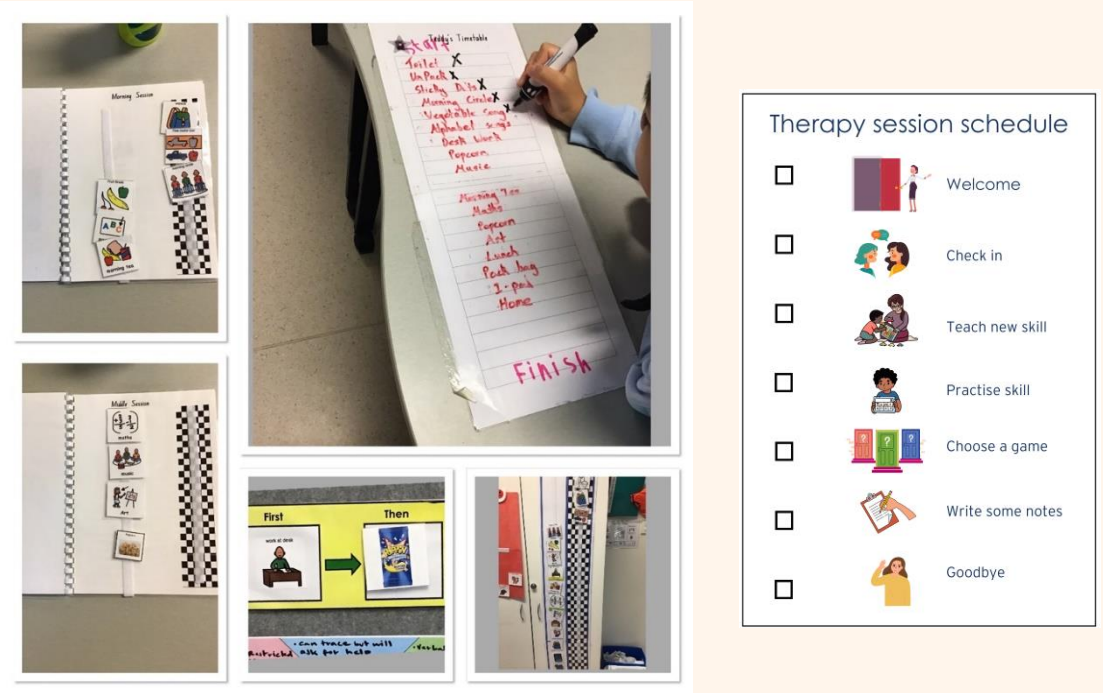


*Figure 9: Visual schedules*

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## Why a visual schedule?

- A schedule utilises an Autistic person's strengths and/or preferences for visual information over auditory.
- Verbal instructions are not always clear, can be misinterpreted and can easily be forgotten.
- A schedule is a visual backup for times when verbal instruction and information is missed, miscommunicated or forgotten.

*Figure 2: Schedule is a visual backup for information missed*

## Why is it important to have an individualised schedule?

- A schedule should be individualised, rather than being pitched to a group – everyone has the right to a schedule that suits them and makes sense to them.
- Everyone prefers a different style.
- Different things make sense to different people.
- The ability to understand detail may be varied.
- People need different amounts of detail.
- It is an organisational system for time.


*Figure 3: Schedules individualised for different needs and preferences*

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The portability of a schedule is important to consider. Schedules are not just a strategy to plan and communicate about the day ahead, they should also be available for the person everywhere they go. This allows the person to independently refer to the schedule throughout the day, and can help to reduce confusion, anxiety and communication challenges.

*Figure 4: Portable schedule*

Establish an individual schedule for the student/participant being supported.

- For young children or people who need concrete supports, a schedule is made up of locations, such as *playground, book corner, desk work, group table, toilet*.
- For others who require less support, the schedule may be made up of the activity name such as, *English* or *Café* and may include time.
- Pictures or real objects can be used for words not understood or used in conjunction with a written word.
- A written schedule is the easiest form for staff to set up but the most difficult for a person to understand.
- Schedules can be incorporated into technology a person uses but a backup system is needed for when technology is unavailable.
- A schedule needs to be understood when a person is happy and during their 'worst moment' – such as when they are anxious, upset or exhausted. When a person is exhausted, anxious or angry, their ability to think and process information is reduced. For example, a person may be able to read and comprehend written word, however, when anxious using a photograph of the space may be more effective.



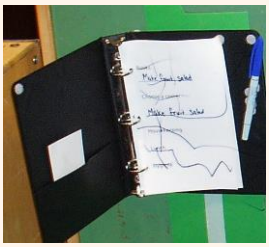

*Figure 5: Part day schedules*

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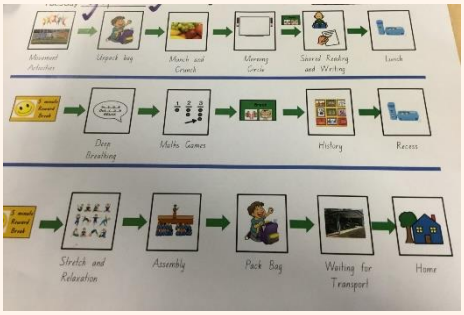
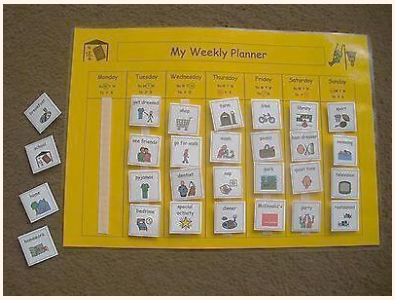



*Figure 6: Whole day schedule*



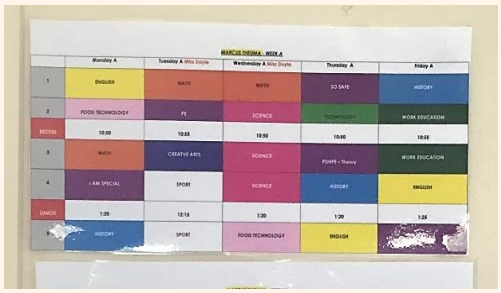



*Figure 7: Whole week schedule*

*Table 3: Schedule considerations checklist*

| Schedule review | Yes/No | Comments |
|---|---|---|
| Where appropriate, an overall weekly/monthly calendar (which includes assignments, work commitments, locations, and activities) is prominently displayed and being followed. | | |
| The person being supported can access their own individual timetable. | | |
| The individual schedule uses symbols and a format (for example, length of time) the person can understand and is used throughout the day. | | |
| The person is able to understand and independently follow their individual schedule. | | |
| The person being supported and/or their family has been involved in the development of their individual schedule (preferences and interests included). | | |
| There is a reasonable balance of activities the person wants to do and is expected to do in the day. | | |

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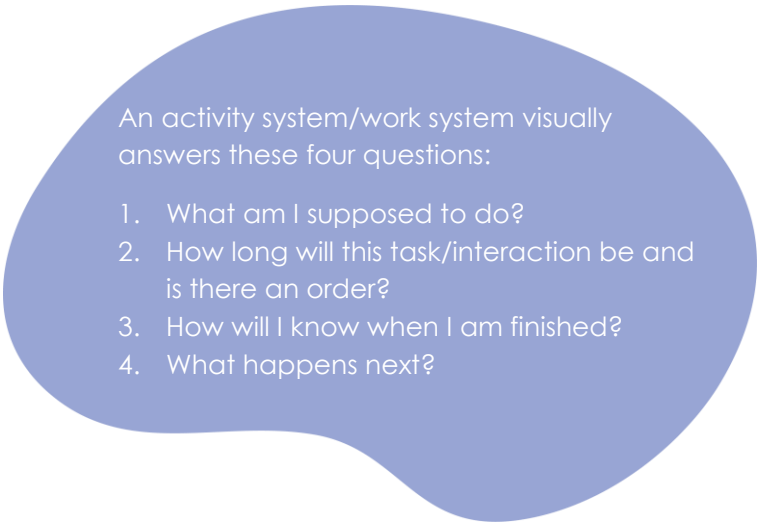
## Activity system, also known as work system

An activity system – or commonly known in schools as a work system – is a visual backup for instructions given verbally, which can be miscommunicated, missed or forgotten. It details for the person what they are expected to do during an activity.

An activity system/work system:

- visually clarifies expectations and increases productivity
- is a key tool for organisation, sequencing and independence
- if used in different contexts, will promote generalisation of skills
- makes clear how to start and finish something and is used to break down a situation, task or activity
- is critical for understanding an activity or interaction, staying focused and independently completing the activity/interaction.




These questions may seem obvious to most people, however, when expectations are unclear this can prevent some people on the autism spectrum from starting and finishing tasks. For group situations it is important that the activity system/work system put in place is at a level all individuals can understand. This may mean some individuals will have a more concrete system than they would if engaging in an activity on their own.

When setting up an activity system/work system for someone, staff should consider the following:

- An activity system/work system needs to be at the person's comprehension level and should be in a similar format to their schedule.
- Like their schedule, an activity system/work system needs to be understood during their worst moment (when they are at their most anxious, exhausted or angriest).

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- When working with a group the activity system/work system used needs to be understood by all. This may mean the person uses a more concrete system then when they are engaging in an activity on their own.

Presenting information that is easily understood is not problematic, presenting information that is difficult to understand is problematic for the person.

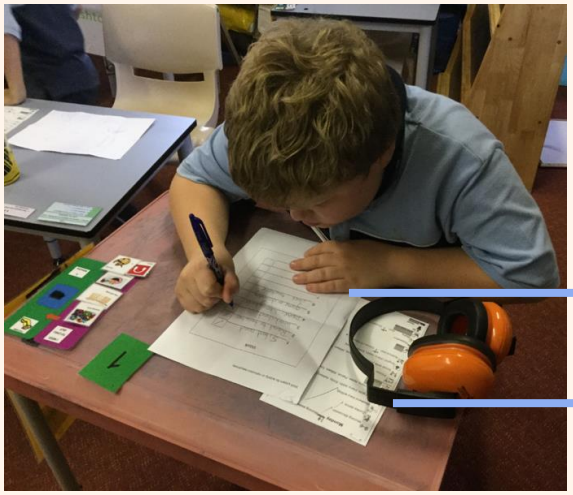


*Figure 8: Work system is similar format to schedule*

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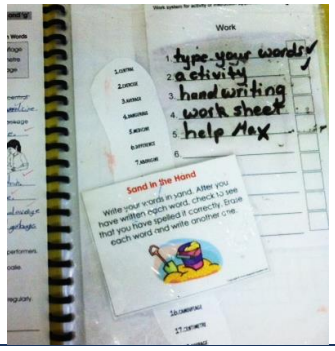
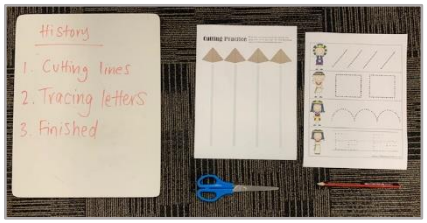
*Table 4: Types of activity systems/ work systems*

| Type | Example |
|---|---|
| Fixed position (on wall) |  |
| Portable |  |
| Left to right sequence with a finished box (this is the most concrete level) |  |
| 'To do' lists – using a picture list to show the person what needs to be done |   |
| 'To do' lists – using a number list to show the person what needs to be done |  |

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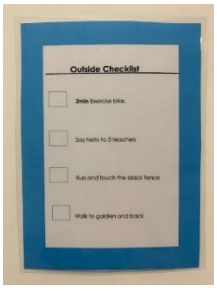
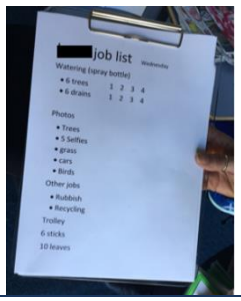
| | |
|---|---|
| 'To do' lists – using a picture/shape/colour/number/written list to show the person what needs to be done |  |
| 'To do' lists – using a written list to show the person what needs to be done |  |
| 'To do' list in a group situation |  |
| Embedding movement into the activity system/work system (moving to get tasks or moving to a finished box) for some people being supported. For an Autistic person who might be easily distracted at the time, providing movement in an activity/work system may not be the best way to support them. |  |
| Specific instructions and reminders for an activity or situation can also be added; for example, 'Ask teacher to sound out words I can't spell.', 'Ask mum for help when I get stuck with my Lego.', 'Remember to take my change or receipt when I buy something.'. |  |

The Structured Supports Overview form can be used to document an individualised activity system/work system for a person being supported.

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## Visual structure

Visual structure supports a person to look for information which will help them understand a task or social expectations.

We all benefit from environments that have clear visual structure. Visual structure supports a person to look for information in different environments. Visual structure uses an Autistic person's strength in noticing visual detail, to show what they are expected do. It is crucial for supporting and increasing a person's understanding and independence with the tasks engaged in, and can develop flexibility and generalisation of skills. The three areas to consider when providing individualised visual structure are:

1. visual instruction
2. visual organisation
3. visual clarity.

### Visual instruction

**Visual instruction shows a person what needs to be done in different situations (this may involve a sequence of steps).**

Visual Instruction can be provided through:

- templates/silhouettes
- pictures
- numbered steps
- written word.



**Look at the table on the next page. What is your eye drawn to – the pictures of the words?**

This is different for everyone, and it is important that visual instruction is individualised for the person being supported.

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*Table 5: Visual instructions in the world around us*

| Foot template at a sports field | Street sign | Toilets sign at public pool |
|---|---|---|
|  |  |  |
| Calendar | Hotel safe instructions | Cold Rock Ice Creamery Instructions |
|  |  |  |

## Visual organisation

**Visual organisation supports organisation skills and increases understanding of expectations and focus on relevant information, through the reduction of distractions and organisation of spaces and materials.**

Visual organisation is achieved through:

- placement of furniture to define spaces
- masking tape to define spaces
- folders, boxes, containers and trays
- stabilising materials
- limiting materials.

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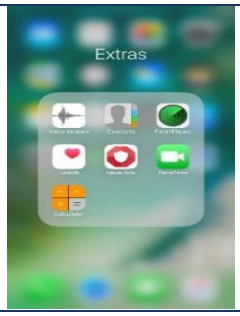
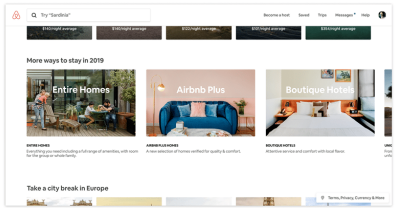
*Table 6: Visual organisation in the world around us*

| Foxtel guide | Apps on phone organised into folders | Airbnb categories for accommodation |
|---|---|---|
|  |  |  |
| Bento box organise food in sections | LAMP Words for Life Language System | Shop signage |
|  |  |  |

**How does this visual organisation structure help you?**

All people have different organisation skills. What works for one person may not work for another.

## Visual clarity

**Visual clarity highlights important information in order to draw attention to the task, activity or interaction.**

Visual clarity is all about popping out important information to draw attention to the most relevant and useful information. Visual clarity can be provided through:

- colour
- size of visual information being provided (text or pictures)
- highlighting information
- arrows
- spacing and bullet points.

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*Table 7: Visual clarity in the world around us*

| Rubbish bin at airport | Swimming pool | Street signs | Uber |
|---|---|---|---|
|   |   |   |  |

**In the images above, what information pops out for you?**

**How has the most important information been made clear to you?**

It could be this component of visual structure (not the task itself) that is preventing the person from comprehending what they are required to do.

When developing tasks or supports for a person on the autism spectrum, try to work out if they can see what they are expected to do, without relying on a verbal instruction.

Is it clear how to start and finish a task?

- Can the person see the sequence of the task/interaction (where to start and finish)?
- Is it clear what materials are involved in the task?
- Are the steps for an interaction clear?

The same four questions for planning a activity system/work system can be used to help plan or review a task, lesson or supports for an interaction.

1. What am I supposed to do?
2. How long will this task/interaction be and is there an order?
3. How will I know when I am finished?
4. What happens next?

It is crucial that restructure occurs when current structure provided is ineffective in supporting a person. If a person is finding it difficult to complete a task or interaction and requires support, independence can be achieved through the restructuring of tasks to include a greater degree of visual organisation, visual clarity and/or visual instruction.

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*Table 8: Visual structure for activities or interactions*

| Visual structure | Examples |
|---|---|
| Visual instruction<br><br>Visually shows the beginning, the sequence of steps and endpoint of an activity, task or interaction. | Support understanding of task expectations using:<br><br>• task materials to define what to do<br>• a left-to-right sequence of materials<br>• a product sample (a model of a finished product)<br>• templates of where to place things or to show how many of something is needed<br>• picture instructions<br>• written instructions<br>• a top to bottom (vertical) sequence. |
| Visual organisation<br><br>Shows how space and materials are organised to enhance a person's attention and independence. | Support sequencing and organisation skills through:<br><br>• container organisation for tasks<br>• stabilsing materials<br>• limiting materials to only those needed (most concrete level)<br>• making available only textas needed for task<br>• using large printing, one word per card/label<br>• increasing space between printed material<br>• having only one online task shown open at a time<br>• folding a page or covering a page so only relevant information can be seen<br>• making available only cutlery needed for table setting<br>• segmenting materials for task<br>• separating visual information on a worksheet/online activity using boxes<br>• limiting space for an activity (such as mat to define play space)<br>• presenting information on one sheet of paper. |

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| | |
|---|---|
| Visual clarity<br><br>Identifies relevant information by visually highlighting important information to engage and focus attention on the task/activity. | Clarify information through:<br><br>• colour coding<br>• highlighting key information<br>• picture prompts<br>• pictures paired with written word<br>• labels.<br><br>Clarify order through:<br><br>• numbers – steps of task/interaction are numbered.<br><br>Clarify concept of finished through:<br><br>• finished strip/symbol check boxes on a list for showing step has been completed<br>• different coloured container for finished items. |

`

*Table 11: Visual instruction*

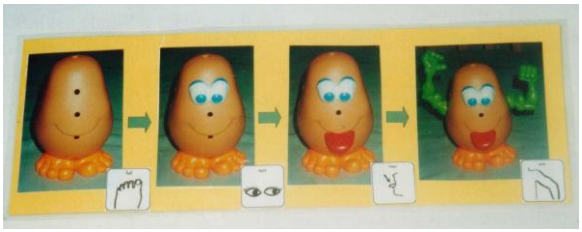
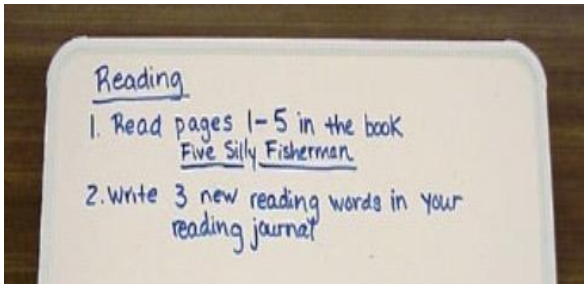
| Materials define a 'put in' task | Left-to-right instructions |
|---|---|
|  |  |
| **Template/silhouette instructions** | **Picture sequence instructions** |
|  |  |
| **Left-to-right picture instructions** | **Coloured dots show order of rings in stacking task** |
|  |  |
| **Written instructions** | **Written instruction** |
|  |  |

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*Table 12: Visual organisation*

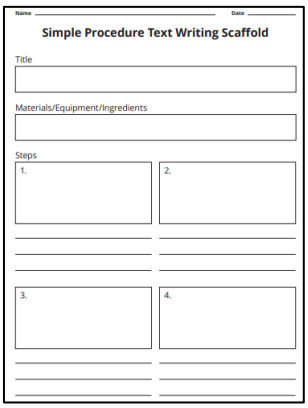
| Stabilised materials for cutting task | Task is self-contained and materials are stabilised to support organisation skills |
|---|---|
|  |  |
| Container organisation for task | Container organisation for task |
|  |  |
| Organisation of materials using pouches | Separating information on a worksheet using boxes |
|  |  |

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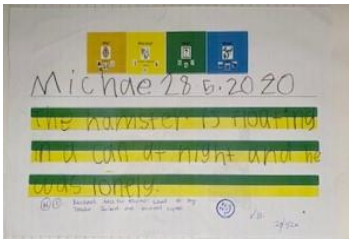
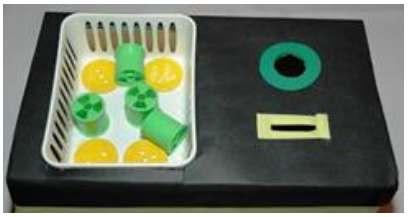
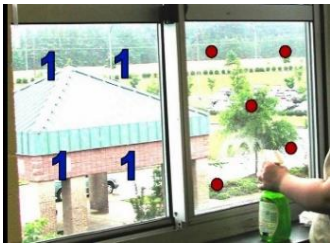
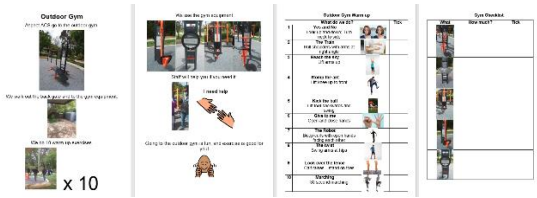
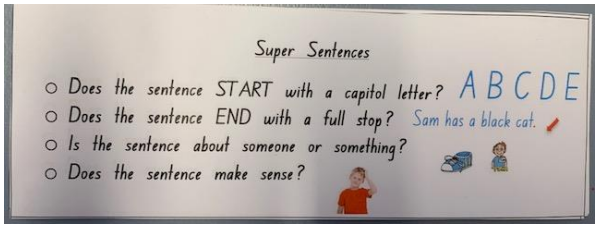
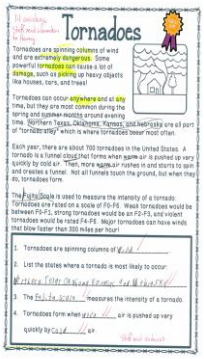
*Table 13: Visual clarity*

| Colour highlights placement of materials | Colour shows where to write |
|---|---|
|  |  |
| Colour coding highlights categories | Colour coding highlights where task materials go |
|  |  |
| Numbers and dots highlight where to clean | Photo clarifies whose turn |
|  |  |
| Box clarifies where to cut | Steps of activity are clarified with photos and numbers |
|  |  |
| Capital letters, colour and pictures draw attention to important information | Important information is highlighted in comprehension task |
|  |  |