



# Visual Schedules

A visual schedule is a clear schedule (often with pictures) which lists what has to be done within a certain period of time, and what is required to complete each task. By having a visual schedule, students can participate in a number of scheduled activities while decreasing the feeling of unfamiliarity or stress, sometimes involved with change (Brown, n.d.). Evidence supports the use of visual schedules with students who require assistance in structuring tasks and managing time (Mesibov, et al., 2002; Massey & Wheeler, 2000; Bryan & Gast, 2000).

**Keywords:** *visual schedule, attention, anxiety, concentration, classroom engagement, routine*

Many students may benefit from a visual schedule, including:

- Students with organisation difficulties
- Students with memory difficulties
- Those unable to read a written timetable
- Strong visual learners
- Students who are frequently off task, inattentive and unfocused
- Students who have difficulty completing all tasks within a timely manner
- Students who have difficulty transitioning between activities

## Types of Visual Schedules

When introducing visual aids, it is important to consider what visual cue the student you are supporting will understand best. There is a hierarchy of visual supports:

1. **Object Schedules:** these are the most concrete schedules. An object represents where you should go and what you should do. For example, a specific red pencil may indicate that it's time for writing practice at the writing corner.
2. **Photograph Schedule:** If students can consistently look at a picture and match it to the object/location in real life, then they may be able to use a photograph schedule. Photograph schedules may be pictures of the student or someone else doing specific activities or photographs of an object/location (e.g. a photograph of a recorder to indicate music time).
3. **Clip art/Board Maker/Symbolic Drawings:** If a student can consistently match drawings and/or symbols to the correct object/place they may be able to use one of these schedules. Drawings are more symbolic than photographs and may be more difficult to generalise than photos.
4. **Written Lists:** This is the most abstract type of schedule and should only be used for strong readers who can interpret and generalise this information. For emerging readers, it is often best to pair a photograph or clip art schedule with the written word. Schedules should be easily understood even when a student is stressed or having a difficult day—the focus should not be on building literacy skills.

## Introducing a Visual Schedule to a Student

Prior to implementing a new system or structure (e.g. a schedule), consider the following:

- Is the student a strong visual learner? If so, they may need to “see” what to do rather than just hearing it.
- Strong interests—transitions away from a preferred activity can be especially difficult for some students.
- Routines—some students rely on their routines at school for understanding and “rules” about how the day will run. If there is an unexpected change in routine, this can disrupt transitions. For further information on helping students cope with changes throughout the day, see SALDA handouts *Planning for Transitions* and *Helping Students Cope with Change*.

The following process may be used to implement a visual schedule:

1. Design a logical sequence of the student’s daily routine (or class routine).
2. Identify appropriate visual cues which can be used to enhance the student’s understanding of the routine you would like them to be aware of. For example, a daily routine may look like:



3. Sit down with the student and explain the schedule. Explain how they will use it, where they can keep it, why it is helpful, etc. To be more flexible, it is often a good idea to laminate individual tasks and velcro them to the daily schedule, so if change is planned for one day then the student’s visual schedule will be reflective of each change (e.g. a relief teacher or assembly)
4. Explicitly teach and practice using the schedule with the student. It is important to note that just creating the schedule is not enough, students must be taught how to use the schedule and allowed opportunities for practice and error.

## Further considerations when implementing a new visual schedule

### How will the student use this schedule?

For some students, they may move the picture to a finished box/envelope on the schedule. For students who may need more visual reminders/prompts, you may decide to use matching. With this strategy, the student would take the picture from their schedule and match it to an identical picture in the place where they are transitioning to. For example, the student may take the picture of carpet time to the carpet and match it to an identical picture at the carpet where they sit. In this way, the student has a visual reminder to carry during the physical transition.



### **Trial first**

Consider the first schedule a rough draft. Do not spend a great deal of time making it “perfect” as it is only through trial and error that you will determine the exact type of schedule that will work with the student.

### **Length of schedule**

How many tasks/steps to include on a schedule is student specific. Schedules can range from one item to a sequence that spans the whole day. Remember that the focus of this schedule is to support transitions. It is not necessary to put every step of a specific activity on the schedule. For example, the student’s schedule may have a picture for maths that directs to the math centre. Once they are at the math centre, there may be a separate checklist or work system to follow.

### **Initiating/Checking schedule**

Consider how you will prompt the student to initiate or check their schedule. You may decide to use a specific schedule cue card that always means “check your schedule”—for example, a picture of a Minion indicates “check my schedule” and anytime the student sees this picture or is handed this picture, they will know to check their schedule. It may not be realistic for the student to use a schedule for the whole day or it may not be necessary if the student has some parts to the day that run quite smoothly. Having a consistent cue or visual for “check my schedule” will support this process and allow for flexibility in when and how it is used.

### **Promoting flexibility and introducing change**

Schedules should be dynamic. Life changes and schedules often change, both expectedly and unexpectedly. To support students with these changes, it’s important to frequently make small changes to the schedule. In addition to these small changes (e.g. changing order or switching outside play with indoor play some days), bigger schedule changes should be intentionally introduced from the beginning.

To start, make changes which are positive for the student (e.g. a preferred activity in place of a less preferred)—and show the student the change. This needs to be explicitly taught and shown. For example, “XX, we have a change to the schedule today, instead of handwriting this morning, we’re going to play Lego.” Show this on the schedule as you explain. Eventually shift from positive changes to neutral changes and then practice more difficult ones. By setting up this expectation for change and involving the student in the process, they may be more likely to handle those impromptu changes that inevitably happen.



### Want to learn more?

To learn more about Language Disorder and how to support children and young people for whom language is their primary disorder, please contact Speech and Language Development Australia (SALDA). SALDA provides holistic, innovative and effective therapy, education and support services and has a transdisciplinary team of speech pathologists, occupational therapists, educators, psychologists and physiotherapists.

Contact: 1300 881 763 or [hello@salda.org.au](mailto:hello@salda.org.au)

Website: [www.salda.org.au](http://www.salda.org.au)

Facebook: [www.facebook.com/SALDAustralia](https://www.facebook.com/SALDAustralia)

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