Visual Strategies for Improving Communication

I. <u>**Why use visual supports?**</u>
Visual supports enhance the communication process. Many students are at a disadvantage because they lack the ability to communicate effectively. Children with autism and other communication disorders struggle on a daily basis to comprehend auditory messages. These students may be able to process auditory messages but at a much slower rate. These students may just start to understand what is being asked of them and then the person moves on to a new request. Meanwhile the student is left trying to make sense of the first request. The teacher might see this as noncompliance and punish the student for not being able to process language at a "normal" speed. Visual supports enhance the auditory message by providing visual cues to the student.

II. <u>**What are visual supports?**</u>
According Linda Hodgdon, visual supports can come in the following forms:
▫ Body language (e.g. facial expressions)
▫ Natural environmental cues (e.g. printed materials such as signs, signals, logos, & prices)
▫ Traditional tools for organization and giving information (e.g. calendars, schedules)
▫ Specially designed tools to meet specific needs (e.g. individually made subject sequence charts or behavioral/classroom expectations)

III. <u>**Why use visual supports?**</u>
▫ Teach skills
▫ Teach compensatory strategies
▫ Modify environments for maximum learning

IV. <u>**Practical ideas, examples and techniques**</u>: **visual supports provide the following:**
a. <u>**Tools to give information**</u>
o Schedules/Mini-schedules – example of daily schedule
o Select a representation system
o Select a format
o How will the schedule be used
o Use the schedule to communicate with others

b. <u>**Calendars**</u>
A calendar is a vehicle through which many skills can be learned and built upon. It is a tangible form of communication and since many students require direct hands on learning, it is a perfect tool for them to use to further their communication.

Calendar systems build structure, independence and security into a student's day   as well as enhancing and developing methods for communication. Every time an activity takes place the symbol must be used. If the symbol is consistently paired with an activity the students will build an association.

c.   Choice Boards and Menus
- Common problems and solutions can often be understood by providing a visual social story or understanding of what is expected from the student.

d.   Communicating "No"

e.   People Locators - Students understand who their teacher and classroom peers are and how to relate to them.

f.   Transition and Travel Helpers
- Prepare students for transitions
- Make transitions part of the routine
- Give information and cues to prepare student for what is next
- Common problems and solutions can be resolved with visuals (social stories)
- Aids to give effective directions

g.   Classroom Management tools
- Gain and maintain student attention
- Create support for students to stay on task
- Make directions clear and precise
- Help student remember what he/she needs to remember
- Common problems and solutions

h.   **Task Organizers & Cookbooks** – visual tasks can be broken down into small steps

I.   Structuring the Environment
- Labeling objects in the environment
- Organizing life with charts and visual messages

j. Mediating communication between environments
- Visual Bridges (e.g. going from school to home & vice versa) –   example of visual note from home "Last night at home I…."
  - Dictated language experience story
  - Structured written communication

- Builds a communication link between school-home

k. Communicating in a variety of environments
- Improving communication on the home front – simple ideas for home
  - Be observant of student's needs
  - Recognize that home and school are
  - different
  - Communication needs to be efficient
- Helping students understand the Do's and Don'ts for success at home
  - ❖ Do: Make aids for a purpose
    - Think carefully how you will use them
    - Make visuals simple
    - Combine pictures and words
    - Tackle one project at a time
    - Prioritize

  - ❖ Don't: Be discouraged if it doesn't work at first

l. Assessing participation in the community
- Identifying what skills to teach
- What environment supports already exist for the student to access
- Where visual tools would provide extra help to increase
- independence

m. Materials and Supplies
- Camera
- Do's and don'ts for effective photography
  - Make photographs simple
  - Limit background information
  - Place a neutral background to highlight object

n. Making Decisions About Calendar Format
Given that all students can benefit from calendar systems, we need to make decision about what format is most appropriate for a given student. The following questions need to be answered:

1. Is the calendar appropriate for the student?
   First and most importantly, we need to determine the representational level of the student? Does the student understand that objects can represent activities? Does the student understand that packaging, photographs, tactile symbols, parts of objects, symbols or words can represent objects and activities?

If the student needs concrete physical cues, what is sensory channel is preferred b the student? Does the student respond best to auditory, visual, tactile, kinesthetic, or olfactory cues?

Once the level of representation is determined, the number and size of items on the schedule must be determined and an age appropriate representation chosen for each activity on the student's calendar.

2. Is the calendar understandable to the student?
Where will the calendar system be placed for easy access? Are the representations easy for the student to discriminate? Can the student tell the materials apart using whatever modality s/he uses?

Remember:
- When we are teaching students with communication disorders, we need to provide *visual cues* so the child does not have to spend all his or her energy processing the auditory message.
- Using *visual supports* for these children is like reading subtitles in a foreign film. You would be lost if you did not have the written sub text to guide you while you were receiving and trying to cognitively process a foreign film.

* Linda Hodgdon, Visual Strategies for Improving Communication, 1997