

Pictures and Symbols

Pictures and symbols can be used to help children to focus their attention on activities, understand spoken language and common routines, and to help them cope with changes to these routines. Use of pictures and symbols in this way is sometimes referred to as using 'visual supports', and some examples are:

Visual timetables



This is a laminated strip with hard Velcro attached so symbols can be affixed. Symbols have soft Velcro on the back. The symbols represent the routine imposed on the children by the setting. There is **no choice** associated with the use of the timetable. Activities may vary from day to day. It can be used for all the children or be specific to a particular child.

Where should it be?

Usually on the wall at the children's eye level, in the area of the room where the whole group gathers for registration, story time etc. There should be a postbox, shiny bag or coloured envelope available near the timetable for the children to put each symbol in as they are removed.

What is it for?

It helps children to predict the daily routine and to transfer their attention from one activity to the next. It can help to reduce anxiety around change. It provides visual back-up to verbal information so supports children's understanding of language.

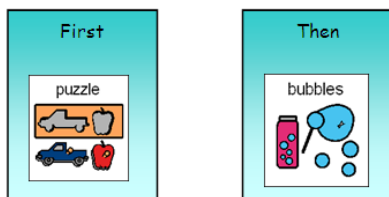
How is it used?

Show the child(ren) what is due to happen, pointing to the picture as you name the activity, eg: 'First circle time, then playing, then snack'.

When an activity is over, take the child to the timetable and point to the relevant symbols saying eg: 'Playing is finished, it's time for snack'. The child then removes the symbol for 'playing' and puts it in the box/bag/envelope provided.

The symbols can be changed to reflect the changes to daily routine and therefore reduce any related anxieties. If something unusual is happening, such as a visit from the dental nurse or a trip to the woods, a symbol for this should be incorporated.

First/then board



This is usually a laminated A4 sheet with two pieces of hard Velcro attached, and 'First' and 'Then' (or 'Now' and 'Next') clearly written at the top. Symbols should be the same as those used for visual timetables and have soft Velcro on the back.

Where should it be?

Easy to access. Key workers usually carry the symbols with them in a belt or attached to a keyring on a belt.

What is it for?

- To help the child transfer attention from one activity to the next when this is difficult for them.
- To encourage the child to participate (initially briefly) in an adult-directed activity.
- To extend listening and attention skills over time.
- To support understanding of spoken language.

How is it used?

Affix the symbols - the 'first' symbol represents the activity the adult would like the child to join in with. The 'then' symbol represents something highly motivating to the child.

Point to the symbols telling the child eg: 'First story, then cars'.

Take the child to the 'first' activity. If they struggle to sit, point to the 'first' symbol and remind them eg: 'It's time for story'.

Prime the child when a change in activity is imminent, eg: 'One minute, then story is finished – it's time for cars'.

Be realistic – have a specific target relating to the length of time the child is able to focus. This may be as little as 30 seconds initially. The target would then be 'For (Name) to sit in the whole group with the support of an adult and a first/then board for 30 seconds'.

When the child has sat for the targeted length of time, they can take the 'first' symbol off. Tell them eg: 'story is finished, it's time for cars'. The child can then move on to the 'then' activity which should be highly motivating, as a reward for spending a short time at the adult-directed task.

Aim over a prolonged period of time to gradually extend the length of time the child spends at the 'first' adult-directed activity (eg: the story), whilst reducing the length of time playing at the motivating activity (eg: the cars).

Other uses of symbols

Choosing:

Settings sometimes use symbols to support choices. For example they may show the child a symbol of an apple and a banana at snack time and ask them to choose which one they want.

Pictures to request:

Symbols are sometimes used for reluctant talkers in specific situations. For example, if a child is reluctant to ask for the toilet he may have a symbol which he can take or show to an adult to indicate this.

You can find some more examples of how to use visual supports in the Communication Station video here: <http://www.nhselect2.org.uk/slt/slt10.php>

Further information on all visual systems is available from your Speech and Language Therapist.