How visual timetables can support children with speech, language and communication needs in the early years

What is a visual timetable?

As adults, we have a good understanding of the hour of the day, how time passes and how long we are likely to have to wait for something important in our schedule. The majority of us keep a diary or calendar to help us remember our important appointments, key dates and tasks or activities that we need to do.

Our schedule is usually in written format, kept on our desk, in our bags or on our phones. I know that I would really struggle without mine!

Equally, the majority of children in the early years struggle to know what is coming next, how long five minutes or an hour actually is, or the sequence of events in their (usually) adult-directed world.

A visual timetable, timeline or visual activity schedule is a way of supporting a child to predict what will happen next. It enables a child to know the things that must happen first, before they can do the activity that they are often focused on. It also helps them to understand where they are in the day, by knowing what has gone before and what will come after the present moment.

Yourtherapysource.com describes a visual timetable as 'a series of images, pictures, photographs, or line drawings used to depict a sequence of events.' The images can run from left to right or top to bottom (for conformity to our written language formats) and the images can be removable to help signal when an activity is completed.

Examples of visual timetables are shown here:

Image courtesy of www.autismspectrumteacher.com

Image courtesy of www.reachoutasc.com

Visual timetables can be used for children in whole groups, or be individually tailored for particular children to work through on a one to one basis. The general format can remain the same across a range of age groups, but the images and content should change according to the age and development of the child.

The visual timetable can cover activities across the whole day, or across a shorter period of time such as a morning or afternoon, or even be broken down into smaller steps within an individual activity or routine. It might be particularly helpful with key routines such as washing hands or getting ready for home-time.

Should I use a visual timetable for a child with speech, language and communication needs?

Because of the particular impact of speech, language and communication needs, and some other special educational needs and disabilities, visual timetables can be particularly useful for helping these children to understand their day and predict what is coming next.

You may have heard about visual timetables or schedules in relation to children on the autistic spectrum. Many of the communication and anxiety issues that the use of visual timetables seeks to resolve for these children are the same for children with speech, language and communication needs.

Knight et al (2015) identified that visual timetables can be considered evidenced based practice when used with children on the autistic spectrum. As

with much good practice, when used correctly (see below), visual timetables are useful for all children, not just those with additional needs.

Visual timetables can be used in early years settings as well as at home.

Visual timetables can help children who:

- struggle to understand what is being said

- find it difficult processing spoken information

- have poor auditory memories (difficulty listening and remembering information they have heard)

- have reduced understanding of time and the passing of time

- have increased anxiety related to change, or moving from one activity to another.

The benefits of visual timetables are that they:

- provide visual representation of information that is being discussed

- help reduce anxiety or stress when a child is moving from one activity to another, or waiting for a particular event

- provide a simple way of understanding the past, present and future. This supports a child to know where they are in time

- enable opportunity to reflect on activities that have already happened

- provide boundaries for planning activities and moving from one activity to another.

How can I get a visual timetable?

There are some commercially available visual timetables or frameworks for visual timetables. However, because of the individual development and needs of the child, it is often best to make your own. You will find links below to resources that will help.

Some key points to remember are:

- Consider the size of the step or activity to be represented by the timetable (For getting dressed, you will need to include a picture representing each item of clothing the child will wear. For a morning at nursery, pictures representing each of the individual activities are enough.)

- The timeline will need to depict the order of activities or steps from left to right or from top to bottom. Ensure you put the pictures in the right order.

- Consider what type of picture you will include – for younger children (or some children with additional needs), a photograph of the actual object or activity is best. Older children may understand symbols or more representational pictures.

- Think of how you can demonstrate which activity or step the child is currently doing (see below):

  ○ A star or arrow can be moved along the timetable as you move through the activities

  ○ Each individual activity or step can be taken off the timetable once it is finished

  ○ A 'door' or flap can be closed on the activity to indicate that it is complete.

  ○ Make sure that the visual timetable is located in a place easily seen by the child/ren.

How do I use a visual timetable?

One thing worse than not having a visual timetable is having one that is not used appropriately. The visual timetable is an interactive tool and is only useful when it is used that way.

To help a child or children to know where they are in the day, the visual timetable needs to be referred to regularly. There also needs to be a visual reminder of what has already happened and is yet to happen. This needs to be able to be spotted by the child/ren at a glance.

- **Step one**: Introduce the visual timetable to the child/ren at the start of the activity or time period that it relates to. For example, at the beginning of the day, show the child/ren the activities that will be taking place in the morning. If there is a choosing activity, make sure that there is a picture which represents 'choosing-time', but not necessarily what the child has chosen in advance (in case they change their mind).

- **Step two**: Carry out the activity or step that is first on the visual timetable, referring with the child/ren to the picture as you go

- **Step three**: Refer back to the visual timetable and note with the child/ren that this activity has been completed. Show visually that the activity is finished. You, or the child/ren, can take the picture

of the step or activity off the visual timetable and put it into a box marked 'done'. (It is important to keep the picture to refer back to when recapping what has been completed. The pictures of completed activities can also be used when encouraging the child/ren to reflect back, or tell you what they liked best.) Alternatively, you can move the star or arrow across to the next activity or close the door or flap on the completed activity or step.

☐ **Step four:** Repeat steps two and three until the timetable is completed.

It is important that each activity on the timetable is completed and that this takes place in the identified order. If you are running out of time, you can take a very short amount of time with a particular activity, but make sure that you do it. This helps to increase predictability for children and reduce levels of anxiety.

What is a now and next board?

A now and next board is a very much simplified visual timetable which has two activities or steps on it – what is happening now and what is happening next (see image below from suffolklearning.co.uk). This is useful for a child who isn't yet developmentally ready for a visual timetable; is learning the concept and vocabulary for 'now' and 'next'; or who has particular difficulty in moving from one activity to another.

Useful resources and links

Other information about visual timetables:

⬡ https://www.theschoolrun.com/visual-timetables

⬡ https://www.autismspectrumteacher.com/visual-timetables-for-autism/

⬡ shorturl.at/eosDI

⬡ https://reachoutasc.com/blog/the-right-way-to-use-visual-timetables#:~:text=A%20visual%20timetable%20scaffolds%20those%20skills%20and%20most,an%20adult.%20Less%20reliance%20on%20an%20adult%20prompt.

⬡ https://autiplan.com/why-visual-schedules-autism

⬡ https://www.suffolklearning.co.uk/suffolklearning_images/users/Early_Years_Team_CYP//UsingNowandNextBoards.pdf

⬡ https://ican.org.uk/media/1777/visual-timelines-factsheet-parents.pdf

Videos of how visual timetables can be used:

⬡ shorturl.at/fivFM

⬡ shorturl.at/ejlnH

Making your own visual timetable:

⬡ https://www.tes.com/teaching-resource/editable-visual-timetable-with-hyperlinks-6182305

⬡ https://www.tes.com/teaching-resource/ks1-editable-visual-timetable-with-hyperlinks-6183591

⬡ https://www.tes.com/teaching-resource/visual-timetable-6086271

⬡ https://www.tes.com/teaching-resource/widgit-symbol-visual-timetable-6422824

⬡ https://www.sparklebox.co.uk/class-management/routines-organisation/visual-timetable/

⬡ https://www.earlylearninghq.org.uk/class-management/visual-timetables-and-routines/

References:

⬡ https://www.yourtherapysource.com/blog1/2016/11/02/evidence-based-practice-visual-activity-schedules/#:~:text=Evidence%20Based%20Practice%3A%20Visual%20Activity%20Schedules%20Research%20indicates,-particularly%20when%20used%20along%20with%20systematic%20instructional%20procedures.

⬡ Knight, V., Sartini, E., & Spriggs, A. D. (2015). Evaluating visual activity schedules as evidence-based practice for individuals with autism spectrum disorders. Journal of autism and developmental disorders, 45(1), 157-178.

All these resources and links include a hyperlink. Just click on the one that interests you to get to the related page.