



Hot Tips for IY Autism Programs Using Visual Pictures to Enhance Children’s Understanding of Verbal Language

Carolyn Webster-Stratton, Ph.D.

Many children are visual learners. This is especially true for children on the autism spectrum. Why is this? Perhaps children with ASD or language delays have more difficulty processing verbal language because auditory information is presented quickly, is transient, and is more complex. Pictures, on the other hand, are fixed images so the child can take as much time to process the information as they need. Seeing it rather than just hearing it, can help the child process and retain the information. In this document we will talk about how parents and teachers can use visual images to enhance a child’s understanding of verbal requests and to provide a way for the child to improve communication with others.

Model sounds, gestures, and simple words for objects or behavior actions

In the Hot Tips for Autism document [Communication Translation: Combining Body Language, Sounds, & Words to Enhance Comprehension](#) we talked about how the parent or teacher can act as a communication translator for their child by carefully selecting and pacing the number of words to model and by using the “one up” rule to name or describe objects, actions, and positions. This method uses word imitation, repetition, interesting sounds, tone of voice, nonverbal gestures and body language to help children process language and communicate. These approaches help to turn on the child’s voice and enhance their understanding of the meaning of words and their realization that their words and/or gestures are a way to indicate their wants and needs.

For less verbal children, use visual pictures as a way for them to indicate their choice or request for something such as food, play activity, or need from another

Pictures of Objects and Activities: The IY autism group leader manual provides picture examples of some common favorite activities such as playing with blocks or Legos, play dough, cars, bubbles, art activities, board games, reading books, singing songs, going to the park, throwing a ball, or having a special snack. Picture line drawing communication symbols (PCS) and many other free line drawing printables can be found online by Boardmaker (Mayer-Johnson) or other companies. First the parent or teacher makes a list of the child’s “likes” or favorite activities and then can either find free pictures of these activities on-line, make their own drawings, or, better yet, take photographs of the child actually engaged in these activities. From these pictures a customized *Activity Choice Board* or book can be made for the child. These



If parents have access to the program BoardMaker™ or a similar symbol generating program, they can use this to create their own activity boards customized to their child’s particular interests.
Example choice activity cards:

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choice activity picture boards can be used to encourage the child to initiate communication on their own by pointing to or showing a picture of what they want rather than pulling on the adult's arm or crying with frustration because they don't know how to indicate their needs or wants. These activity pictures can also be used to suggest ideas for activities the child could do. The child learns that pictures, like words, stand for a real thing. These pictures are not meant to be permanent alternatives to speech, but to assist in the child's development of speech and ability to plan activities. Visual supports such as written schedules and calendars help most adults keep track of our days and activities. These communication boards serve a similar purpose for young children on the spectrum.

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What is your favorite toy?



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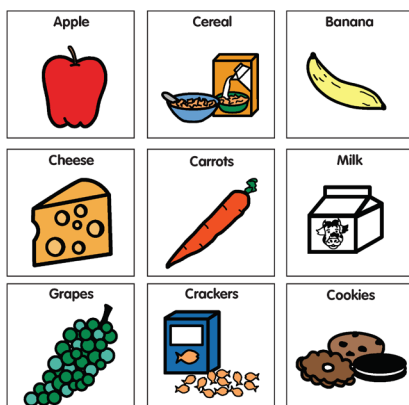
Teaching children to how to use pictures: Nonverbal children will initially need adult assistance and help understanding what each of the pictures represent before they can use the picture as a communication aid to express their wants. Parents or teachers start by matching the real object or activity with the picture. This helps the child understand that a picture can be a representation of an object or activity. For example, when starting an activity, such as playing with playdough, the adult shows the picture and names it. As the child plays, the adult may repeat saying, "play dough" and again show the picture. With time, the child begins to understand what the picture represents. Eventually the child will be able to point to the picture of playdough to indicate their choice of activity, or they may bring the picture to the adult to indicate what they want to do. After the child points to the picture or hands it to the adult, the parent or teacher enthusiastically responds with a gesture and words, "You want play dough! Here is some play dough." To reinforce learning, the adult only offers the child a small amount of play dough so that the child has another opportunity to point to the picture again or use words to ask for more. This time when the child points, the adult responds, "More playdough?" and when the child nods yes, the parent nods and smiles, "Yes more playdough." and gives the child a bit more playdough. With practice and repetition, the child eventually will repeat what the adult says by saying, "more" or "playdough" and the parent will respond with enthusiasm, "more playdough, good words." The child is reinforced for

using their pointing gesture and the visual aid, and for any verbal sounds or words to indicate their choice of activity. It is important that the parent or teacher say the same words every time a visual prompt is used and that the written word of the object or activity is placed under the picture. The ongoing repetition of the same words will eventually reinforce the link between the word and the picture's meaning and the child will repeat the words to make a request. At first, the picture will prompt the child to say the words, and eventually the picture will not be needed and the child will use the word directly to express his or her wants. Adding the written word to the picture helps expose the child to printed words and will enhance pre-reading skills.

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What is your favorite food?



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Other lists of visual prompts can be made for the child's favorite foods or snacks such as cookies, drinks, fruits, vegetables. Again, the parent or teacher first pairs the actual food (banana or apple) along with the picture so the child learns the relationship be-

tween the picture and the specific name for the food.

Songs: Many children on the autism spectrum love it when adults sing to them. The repetitive and simple words are more easily learned with the paced music rhythm. The parent can make a list of pictures of the child's favorite songs or nursery rhymes such as *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*, *Old McDonald*, *Humpty Dumpty* or *Row, Row, Row Your Boat* and show a picture that represents the song while singing the song. For *Old McDonald* it is fun to have pictures of animals so the child can point or say the name of the animal for the next verse.

Once the child has learned the meaning of new pictures and how to point to them, these visual aids expand the child's ability to let the parent or teacher know their preferences in play, singing, or eating. For a child with 1-2 word sentences, it can also be helpful to add a picture card that says, "I want". This can be used when you are ready to expand the child's language from one word to a 3-4 word sentences. If the child has requested the apple by showing the apple picture card and saying "apple", the adult responds, "I want the apple" and shows the "I want" card. It is important for the adult to model asking for the object the way the child himself would say it. Rather than asking, "Do you want the apple?" the adult should say, "I want apple" and the child will eventually repeat this request in the appropriate way. Otherwise, the child may mimic the question: "Do you want the apple?"

How many objects or pictures can be put on a choice board? This will depend on the level of communication the child has, how many pictures he has been taught, and how helpful you find the visual pictures are to enhancing the child's language. If the child has no words or little understanding of words, the parent or teacher will start with just two choices of favorite activities or foods. After these visual prompts have been learned, more pictures and their meanings can be taught and added.

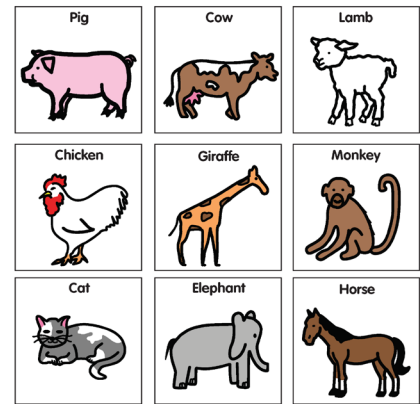
The "No" visual signal: Sometimes a choice on an activity board is not available. For example, no more apples or cookies are left. Or the child has had enough computer time and this is no longer an activity option. The parent can let the child know that by putting the No Sign (circle with slash through it) on top of the picture that it is not an option. At the same time the parent will say, "Cookies all gone" to explain what this signal means.



It is also helpful for the child to learn to communicate when they are finished with an activity and are ready to do something else. When the parent or teacher notices the child losing interest, they can prompt the child to say "all finished" or "all done". Along with the words, the adult models using an all done gesture with their hands, and shows the visual "all done" picture to teach the meaning of this picture. The parent should end their play time activities by saying, "all done" and by showing the child the visual picture. If the visual choice board was used to start the activity, the adult can also turn the picture over to reflect its completion while saying "all done". Then the child can make a different choice from the remaining items on the activity board. It is important to be consistent with word choice. For example, don't say "all done" sometimes and "all finished" other times. Stick with one of these phrases and use the same gesture each time to avoid confusion.



Animal choices for singing "Old MacDonald"



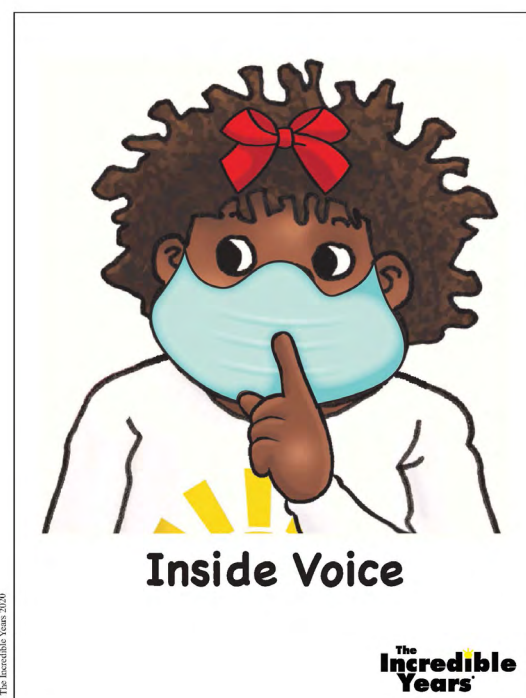
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Saying No: Giving children choices also means helping them learn to say “no” to a suggested activity. The parent or teacher can teach this by deliberately offering a picture of something the child dislikes before offering one of their likes. For example, a child who doesn’t like the feel of playdough is first offered this playdough picture as a possible choice activity. When the child looks at the other picture but looks distressed or doesn’t respond, the adult says, “no thank you” shaking their head no and putting the refused playdough picture away. The adult says, “playdough gone”, and then offers a picture of the child’s preferred activity (toy cars) nodding yes and saying “Yes, please, car” when the child points to the car picture. Once the child has used a verbal or nonverbal communication strategy to indicate the car, the adult gives him one car (holding back the others for repeated practice opportunities).

Chat Cards: Once the child has learned what a number of pictures represent, the parent or teacher can make Chat cards with multiple pictures of favorite sports, animals, characters, foods, or feelings. These can be used to help children know how to have a conversation about a topic with another person. For example, the animal chat card can be used to prompt children to talk about their favorite animal at the zoo, or their pets at home. The adults can focus on adding some key phrases such as, “I like...” or “my favorite food is...” or “I feel happy today because...” or, “today at school I made...” Parents and teachers can model this by sharing their own interests by saying the same thing, “My favorite food is...” or, “Today at work I...”. The child will eventually copy this language with others.

Visual prompts are helpful to communicate parent or teacher requests such as: get dressed, take a bath, go to toilet, wash hands, clean up, turn off computer, or leave the park.

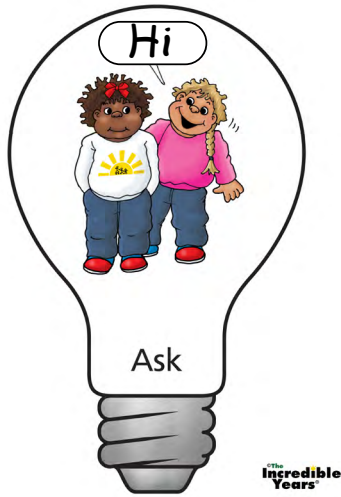
One of the characteristics of children on the autism spectrum is that they don’t follow simple commands and seem not to understand them. Parents or teachers can assist this understanding by using a visual picture to help the child understand their request, or to signal what is going to happen next. For example, the parent might show a picture of a toilet, hand washing, or wearing a mask to indicate that the child needs to do one of these things. Again, prior teaching must occur so that the child knows what the picture means before the adult uses the picture alone to prompt the behavior.



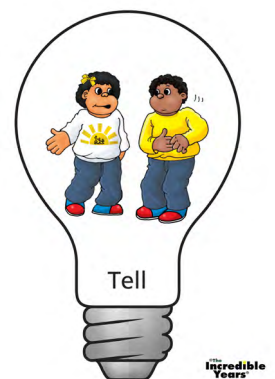
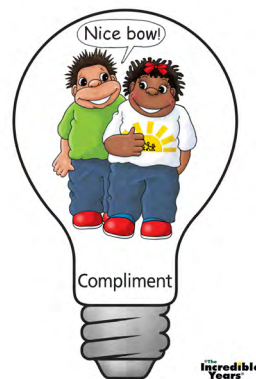
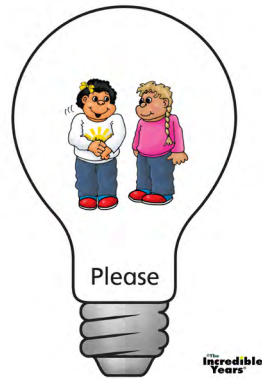


The picture of the stop sign is a useful signal to indicate the child needs to stop what they are doing. The meaning of this visual can be taught by singing a song. Each time the stop sign is held up, the song stops, and when the stop sign goes down, the song starts again.

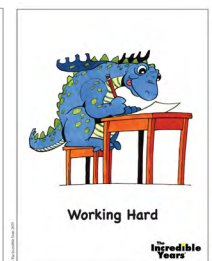
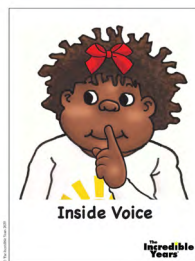
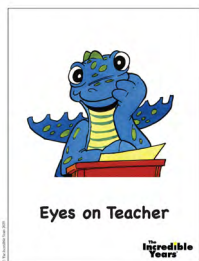
This is repeated several times so that the child begins to learn the meaning of "stop." The stop sign may be paired with a green "go" sign to provide a visual for starting the activity again. Many other start/stop games can be played using the red stop sign signal while running, chasing, or swinging and then the green sign to start again. Parents can help children notice real stop signs as they drive or walk around.



Because children on the autism spectrum are delayed in spontaneous gestures and nonverbal communication, it can also be helpful to make pictures of other key gestures and words such as: waving *bye-bye* and saying *hi*, *all finished*, *sorry*, or *please* or pointing. See examples of some of these common greetings or responses below from the [IY Dinosaur Curriculum](#).



Rules: Pictures of other household or classroom rules or prompts of expected behavior are very helpful for all children in addition to those with ASD. Some commonly used rules in a preschool classroom are: listening ears, hands to self, waiting, walking feet, and quiet voice. Using the same rules pictures, words, and gestures at home and school can strengthen the child's learning of these behavior expectations. It is always best to show pictures of the positive gesture or behavior you want and to model it, rather than show pictures of a negative behavior such as hitting, or running with a No sign drawn through it. Further examples of some of the rules pictures we use in the [IY Dinosaur Curriculum](#) are shown below.



Using Picture Schedules to help children know what is expected and to encourage more independence



Mini picture schedules: Time is very abstract for all young children, especially those on the autism spectrum. Concrete picture schedules of what happens at certain times of the day can help children know what is happening next and what to do. Mini picture schedules can be made for the sequence of predictable daily routines such as going to bed, getting ready for childcare, or morning dressing and breakfast routines. These visual prompts can help a child become less dependent on adults, feel more secure, and know what to do on their own. For example, a bedtime routine might include a picture schedule of each activity in the sequence such as, taking a bath, using toilet, washing hands, brushing teeth, putting on Pjs, and reading a book with the parent. Something similar can be used for morning routine such as using toilet, getting dressed, eating breakfast, brushing teeth, and getting on bus. These pictures can be line drawings easily found on the internet, or actual photographs of the child doing each of these things. For picture schedules that may change depending on the day, it is helpful to attach the laminated pictures with Velcro fasteners so they can easily be changed.



The number of pictures in a sequence will depend on the child's communication level. For some it will start with one activity such as taking a bath and then proceed, over time, to more pictured activities: first bath, then teeth, and then story... These "first-then" boards can also be effective for helping children who are resistive to stopping an activity or who find change in a routine difficult. For example, for the child who doesn't want to stop his spinning activity, the parent or teacher can show the stop spinning picture followed by a picture of the next rewarding activity such as picture of reading a book with the parent. For example, the parent can say, "first stop spinning and then we have our fun reading time." Eventually, with repetition, just showing the child the book, or the cereal box will help the child understand the sequence or routine for the evening or the morning. Above is an example of a first-then picture program with a child who first had to work on a joint shared activity for 10 minutes with another child and then he could play with his favorite dinosaur animals.

In addition to pictures, parents and teachers can show real objects to signal an upcoming activity such as pajamas to indicate bedtime, a bath toy to indicate bath time, or food or a cup to indicate snack or drink time. Auditory cues may also be helpful such as jingling the car keys to let the child know it's time for a drive. These concrete objects and auditory cues can be especially helpful for a child who is reluctant to transition to a new activity.

Whole day schedules: In addition to using pictures to represent a series of mini schedules in the day, some children find it helpful to have a visual picture schedule for the entire day. For example, first the child goes to Grandma’s house (showing picture of Grandma), then having lunch (favorite food item), then watching a video (video), and then being picked up by parent and going home (picture of dad). These concrete examples of what happens at certain times of the day helps children understand what is expected. They also can be used as a kind of picture diary to later talk about and review what they have done that day.

It is also helpful to use a picture to prepare a child for upcoming visits such as going to a movie, or babysitter’s, or grandma’s house or doctor’s office. This can be done by showing pictures of the place and showing what they will be doing there.

Using sequenced visual prompts to help children broaden their play activities

Children on the autism spectrum often show limited play repertoires. They may repeat an action over and over in a ritualistic way. Sequenced activity pictures can be helpful for expanding a child’s play repertoire and giving new ideas about what to do with an unstructured play activity. For example, for a child who likes blocks and always makes the same tower over and over the same way, the parent can present 3-4 pictures of different things that can be made from blocks such as a tower, bridge, or road for racing a car (another favorite activity) under the block bridge. For a child who just rolls playdough in the same way over and over, pictures of different things that can be made from play dough rolls can be provided to offer some different choices.

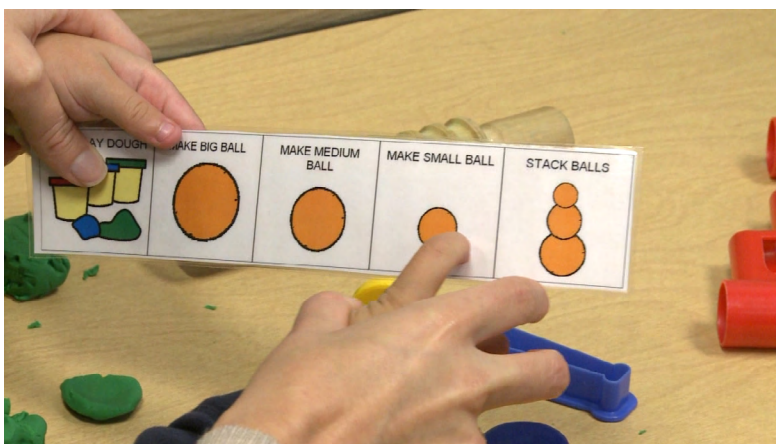
The Incredible Years® Spotlighting

Sample Picture Play Sequence

If parents/teachers have access to the program BoardMaker™ or a similar symbol generating program, they can use this to create their own play sequence boards customized to their child’s interests and designed to add variety to their play interactions.

| | | | | |
|--------------------|-----------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------|
| Car Sequence #1 | Drive Cars | Race Cars | Car in tunnel | Crash cars |
| Car Sequence #2 | Blocks | Build tunnel with blocks | Tunnel with cars in it | All Done |
| Baby Play Sequence | Baby bottle | Baby blanket | Rocking | Baby in Bed |

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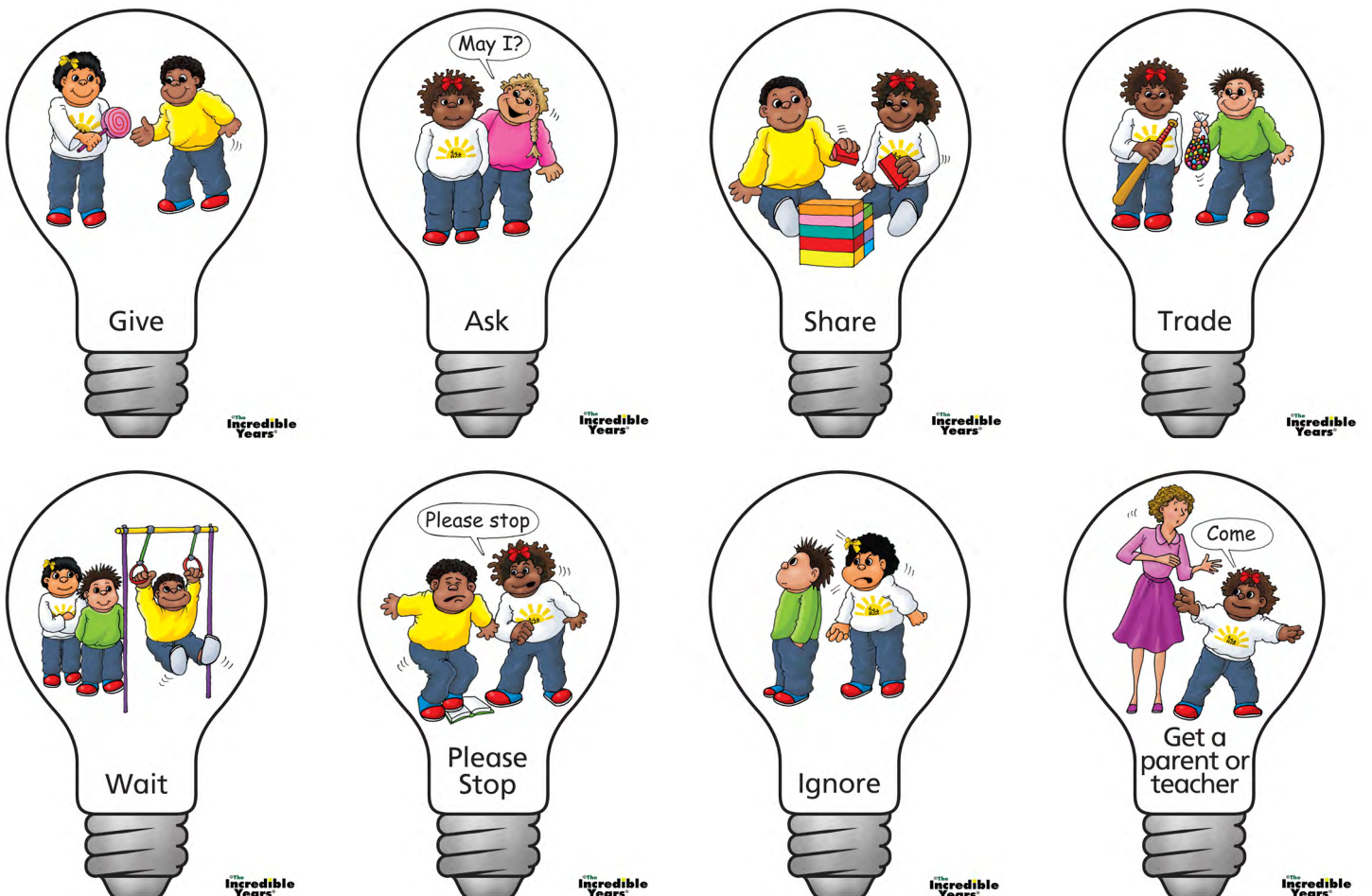
Many play activities can be pictured and be provided to expand the child’s play options: for example, how to play with a baby doll showing pictures of feeding baby, rocking baby, dressing baby, singing to baby, and putting baby to bed. Often children withdraw from play or repeat play the same way because they don’t know how to play or what else to do. These visuals prompt them with other ideas.

Using sequenced visual prompts to help children and know how to participate in a social interaction

Sequenced activity pictures can be helpful for children to know what to do in social situations such as on the playground. Perhaps the child always sits in a corner, doesn't play at all, or doesn't play with others. He might be provided with some visual options of what to do in these unstructured play times such as using the slide, riding in play car, or playing in the sand box. Pictures of ways to engage in social interactions can help a child start to engage with others, such as a picture of waving and saying "hello," or asking someone to play ball. Other common pictures that can be used to encourage more social interaction are pictures of sharing, asking, helping, waiting, and trading. The teacher can use these picture options to help model and prompt the child to ask to play, suggest a play activity, give a compliment, or offer to share a toy or help with something. Eventually the child will understand he can do something besides sitting alone and will know how to initiate an interaction. For these visual social prompts to be successful, teachers and parents will need to use extensive verbal social coaching, modeling of the behaviors, and enthusiastic support and praise for the child's efforts. Here are a few examples of these social pictures from our [IY Dinosaur Program](#).

Social Cue Cards (color version)

Teachers/Parents can make copies of this page and cut out the cards (and laminate them!) to use with their children. They can also create their own cards with BoardMaker™ or other images to create their own visual cue cards customized to their child's particular interests.



Using visual prompts to help children learn to understand and express their feelings, how to self-regulate, and how to say “no”

Children with ASD are often delayed in their emotion language and emotional gestures, such as smiling and eye contact. Some parents describe their children as withdrawn and without affect or feelings. However, it is not that such children don't have feelings, but rather that they don't know how to express their feelings or how to read emotion cues in others. [In an earlier IY hot tips for Autism document](#) we talked about the importance of parents and teachers using gestures and facial expressions such as smiles and exaggerated positive tone of voice and words to model expression of feelings. However, the child with autism may have difficulty understanding the meaning of the feeling words. Moreover, since many of these children avoid eye-contact, they may not be looking at the parent or teacher to see their facial expressions and nonverbal clues may be missed. Using feeling pictures along with spoken words and gestures, gives the child more time and more cues to understand the feeling and the context for the feeling (for example, being sad because it is time to stop spinning).



SAD

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HAPPY

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SCARED

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BRAVE

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The [IY Autism Parenting Program](#) package includes small laminated cards with different feeling pictures on a keyring to promote children's learning emotional literacy. These are used by pairing a word for the child's with the picture of that feeling and the word printed underneath. For example, when the child seems happy, the parent names the child's feeling with enthusiasm, smiles and shows the picture of the happy face saying, "you are happy when you are block building." When the child seems fearful or sad the parent shows the fearful or sad picture and names the feeling and explains what is making him feel that way. For example, "you are sad because your tower fell down." When the parent shows the picture, they also mirror the expression of the feeling on their own face. Parents and teachers will start this feeling coaching by identifying 2 emotion words, one positive and one negative/uncomfortable, and then gradually build the child's emotion vocabulary with more pictures of different emotions. Eventually the child will be able to point to a picture of a feeling on the feeling board to show their feeling. With time, repetition, and ongoing modeling, the child will be able to name feeling with words. Ultimately the child will learn to recognize feelings in others.



NERVOUS

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EXCITED

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ANGRY

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LOVE

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As the child gets the idea of what it means to feel happy, sad, or scared it can be helpful to make a feeling book with drawings or photographs of these feelings and examples from the child's life about when the feeling occurred. Positive feelings can be pictured with the positive event: "Jolie is happy when she eats grapes." Uncomfortable or negative feelings can be paired with a coping or "feel-better" strategy. "Alex is sad when he falls down. Hugging mom makes him feel better" or "Menta is mad when she has to stop spinning. She takes a deep breath to calm down." The IY Dinosaur Program also has a feeling wheel. It is fun to spin the wheel and see what feeling that the arrow stops on. The child can make the feeling face, name the feeling, and eventually tell a time they felt that way.

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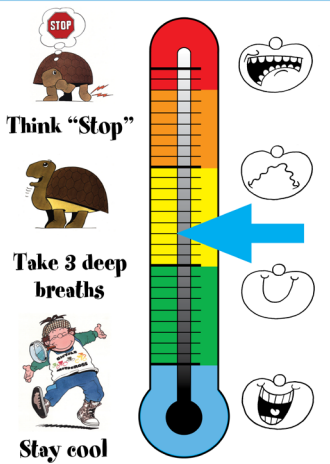
WALLY'S FEELING WHEEL



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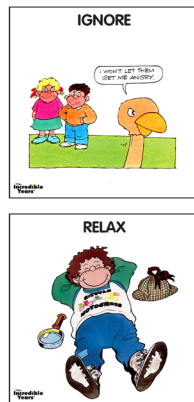
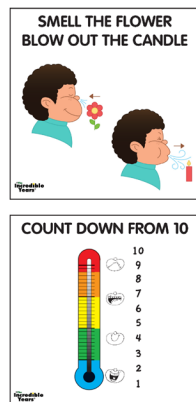
Pictures are also used to represent self-regulation skills such as taking deep breaths, thinking of a happy place, using the calm down thermometer, using the count down method, going into a turtle shell, or taking a break. All of these calm down strategies are practiced with children by showing the pictures while they are helped to do guided practice with the skill. Puppets can be used to model the skill and help the child practice. Once the skill is learned, these visuals can be used to prompt a child to use these strategies when they begin to get frustrated or angry or sad. [Please see IY puppets on our website.](#)

Calm Down Thermometer
I can do it. I can calm down.



Self-Regulation Cue Cards (color version)

Teachers/Parents can make copies of this page and cut out the cards (and laminate them) to use with their children. They can also create their own cards with BoardMaker™ or other images to create their own visual cue cards customized to their child's particular interests.



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Using visual pictures to reward children

[In other documents we talked about the ABC of behavior change](#); that is, using the child's favorite activity as a motivating antecedent (A) to engage them in practice of a targeted behavior (B) followed by the reward consequence of getting the desired activity (C). It can be helpful to make a list of special rewarding activities that a child can choose after he has worked hard on a particular task. "When you finish putting on your shoes (show picture of shoes), you can pick grapes or oranges to eat (show grapes and oranges for child to choose)." Or parent can pre-choose the reward activity based on knowledge of child's likes: "Teeth first (show picture of tooth brush), then story (picture of book)."

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If parents/teachers have access to the program BoardMaker™ or a similar symbol generating program, they can use this to create their own boards customized to their child's particular rewards.



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Tips to Using Visual Prompts

We all rely on visual prompts or supports such as calendars, daily schedules, checklists, stickie notes, or street signs to make sense of the world, to know what is expected, and to keep ourselves organized. For children on the autism spectrum, picture visuals will help reduce some of the confusion of understanding verbal input. Visuals provide information in a way that is easier to process. Better understanding provides children with security, a sense of predictability, and understanding of the rules. Visual prompts also give children another way of communicating their preferences and needs to their parents, teachers, and peer group. They will help the child to be calm and more relaxed and also help promote children's language development, joint attention, and interactions. Here are a few tips to remember:

- Put visuals in place where they will be easily found and used by the child and adults. For example: on a key ring, on the refrigerator, or on a low table.
- Target which activities, requests, or social interactions you want to start with; stay simple and avoid using too many new visuals at the same time
- Use real objects when teaching what the picture represents
- Add the printed word to the visual picture
- Use the same words for the picture every time. Don't use too many words, be simple and clear
- Prompt the child to look at the picture, wait for his response, and then imitate or repeat his response
- For sequenced pictures, preview the sequence by pointing and saying each step. "First, teeth (point to toothbrush), "then story" (point to book). Then review by pointing to each step as the child is engaging in that part of the routine.
- Actual photographs of the child doing the activities or behaviors can help the child make sense of what will be happening
- Add more pictures to the picture routine schedule as the child's understanding of the pictures increases

- Provide multiple learning trials for communication by providing small parts of the activity or item at a time. For example, if the child asks for a banana, apple, or cookie just give a small piece so he can ask again for the next piece. Or, if he asks for cars, just give 1-2 to start.
- Use the visuals to cue or prompt a child to understand an adult's request, make a request, indicate a choice, understand what will happen next and what to do, try a self-regulation strategy, or practice a targeted social interaction
- Remember that picture books are also an ideal way for children to learn about the meaning of words. Read in an interactive way to provide the best communication learning experience. ([See the E-CARE document in parent handouts for reading to children in a way that promotes communicative interactions](#))