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Visual Supports

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What Are Visual Supports?

Have you ever put a sticky note on the bathroom mirror to remind yourself to take medicine? Written a grocery store list to remember to buy the items needed for that Thanksgiving pumpkin pie? Placed a backpack right by the front door so that you do not forget it during the early morning rush to get ready? If you have done any of these things, then you have used a visual support. Visual supports are permanent, visual reminders of what to do or what to say during specific tasks or situations. In other words, they are -- “tools that enable a learner to independently trace events and activities” (Odom, Collet-Klingenberg, Rogers, & Hatton, 2010, p. 279). Visual supports can take many forms, including: scripts, cue cards, schedules, task lists, physically structured areas, organization systems, and graphic organizers. They can be composed of picture icons, photographs, words, or other kinds of visual markings. For individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), visual supports can help increase work independence and accuracy. Visual supports help make tasks and routines more predictable by focusing on the strengths in visual processing and visual memory that many individuals with ASD possess.

What Does the Research Say About Visual Supports?

Visual supports have been identified as evidence-based practices (EBPs) by some researchers and organizations (National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorder; 2015; Odom et al., 2010), while others have classified specific types of visual supports – scripts and schedules – as EBPs (National Autism Center, 2015). Little research thus far has examined the use of visual supports to teach work-related skills, but several recent studies have explored this intervention in vocational training environments. Hume and Odom (2006) demonstrated how the use of an individualized work system - including visual cues, organizational supports for the physical environment,

and a visual schedule - helped one young man with ASD to increase independence and the number of tasks completed, while simultaneously decreasing adult prompting. Researchers have also incorporated visual supports into larger treatment packages that resulted in improvements in internship performance and behavior (Wehman et al., 2012) and in practice interview question responses (Strickland, Coles, & Southern, 2013).

How Can Visual Supports Be Used in Work Settings?



Visual supports can serve a variety of functions at work. They can be used to list the specific tasks that need to be done and to show how to complete those tasks in a step-by-step manner. Visual supports help create structure and organization in work environments, by making it clear on where and what to focus. They can increase independence at work by reducing the need for prompting, and can increase accuracy by visually showing how to correctly complete tasks. Here are several real-life examples of how visual supports have been used in community-based workplace settings:

- An individual assigned to stock linens in a busy emergency room department had difficulty completing the task; she had problems with counting and often forgot to stock items that were empty. To address the counting difficulties, painter's tape was placed on a horizontal line inside of the cabinet shelves to show her how far up to go when stocking linens. The painter's tape support was paired with a photograph of a fully stocked cabinet (affixed to the inner cabinet door) to visually remind her of all the items that needed to be stocked in that particular location.
- A photograph-based task list was used to teach a young man how to prepare ice waters for patients on a busy rehabilitation unit. Leaving the wrappers partially on before inserting them in the cups was particularly difficult for him, so that portion of the task was analyzed, broken down into its component steps, and a photograph-based task list was created.

STRAWS.....



1. Turn it upside down



2. Tear the paper in the middle



3. Take off the bottom paper and throw it away



- One cafeteria worker's job duties included stocking utensils, but she frequently put the wrong utensils in the wrong bins (e.g., putting spoons in the forks bin, or forks in the spoons bin). Picture icons were used to label each bin, and her stocking accuracy improved dramatically. Moreover, this visual support also helped other cafeteria staff members and cafeteria visitors, so the picture labels on the utensil bins became a permanent fixture in the cafeteria.

What Supplies are Helpful to Have on Hand When Creating Visual Supports?

- Painter's tape works well to visually demarcate space. Also, it is simple to remove and does not leave marks.
- An inexpensive laminator and laminating sheets make creating visual supports easy and efficient. Laminating visual supports is especially useful if they will be handled repeatedly over long periods of time.
- If a laminator is not available, try using page protectors to cover the visual support and dry erase markers to mark it instead. This strategy works particularly well for task lists and schedules, by providing a means to engage with the materials without having to repeatedly make paper copies.
- Use Google Images or a camera to obtain "real life" images for visual supports. Google Images has a plethora of icon- and photograph-based images, while taking pictures with a camera ensures that the image on the visual support matches what will be seen by the learner in the actual workplace setting.

Are There Other Considerations When Using Visual Supports at Work?

When considering implementing visual supports in the workplace, planning is essential. First, select the task to target. Tasks that are good candidates include those that are routine, but still require prompting to complete accurately, or that could be more predictable if structured differently. Second, create a teaching plan for the visual support. Will the person using the visual support require direct instruction to learn it? How will the team know that use of the visual support has been mastered? Finally, be sure to take into account specific workplace rules. If the visual support is going to be posted permanently in the workplace setting, get the business approval to do so beforehand. Remember that the visual supports should look professional and be age- and workplace-appropriate. If photographs will be taken to create the visual support, make sure that the business' privacy/ confidentiality guidelines have been followed.

How Can I Learn More?

- Virginia Commonwealth University Autism Center for Excellence website: <http://www.vcuautismcenter.org>.
- National Professional development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorder website: <http://autismmpdc.fpg.unc.edu/national-professional-development-center-autism-spectrum-disorder>
- OCALI Autism Internet Modules website: <http://www.autisminternetmodules.org/>

References

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