

## Tip Sheets

### The Importance of Visual Supports

#### Introduction

As adults, we use visual signs and symbols on a daily basis to help us safely and successfully navigate the world around us. Visuals are used in many ways such as helping to plan and organize, to remind us of what is needed from the grocery store, to remember a special date or event and to help us follow rules to keep ourselves and others safe. While visual supports are important to adults, they are just as significant to children. Young children are just beginning to learn about the world around them. One of the important goals of an early care and education professional is to provide an environment that is supportive in which each child, regardless of ability, has an opportunity to grow and learn with his or her peers.

#### What are Visual Supports?

A visual support is a form of communication in which the information to be shared is presented in a visual way. Visual supports might be photographs, drawings, objects or the written word. A visual support can be anything that is seen and can be used to facilitate communication and understanding.



Although speech is often considered the primary mode of communication and thus is considered an essential part of teaching and learning, it is believed that 80 to 90% of what individuals comprehend occurs through information that is communicated visually. These visual forms of communication include gestures, facial expressions, objects, pictures, icons, photographs, drawings and the printed word.

#### The Benefits of Visual Supports

Visual supports:

- are a part of everyone's system of communication
- attract and sustain attention
- assist an individual to focus on a message/task
- help to reduce anxiety
- make concepts that are abstract more concrete
- help an individual express thoughts, feelings, wants and needs
- help individuals to better understand social cues (gestures, facial expressions, body language and tone of voice)
- provide the structure, routine and sequence necessary to support daily activities
- help an individual know what he/she is supposed to do
- help language diverse learners

Benefits...continued:

- assist in the development of communication skills which can reduce frustration and the use of negative behavior
- increase an individual's ability to access the environment
- encourage the development of skills necessary to be successful in school and throughout life
- help ease transitions from one activity to another

Overall, visual supports can be used to successfully encourage and enhance children's learning and the development of their skills in processing, social interactions, play, cognition and communication.

### Why Use Visual Supports?

Visual supports can be used to support the exploration, development, learning and success of all young children. Spoken words are abstract and do not necessarily hold meaning for young children. This can make it difficult for the brain to retain what is heard. Visuals are concrete and thus are easier to understand and remember. Information that is presented using both auditory and visual cues is much more likely to be recalled by an individual. There is often even better recall when these are paired with active participation and kinesthetic input (movement). The use of visuals in an early care and education program supports the learning, practice and mastery of skills and provides children with opportunities to be more independent. Much of the sensory cortex in the human brain is assigned to vision. The portion of the brain used to process words is smaller, therefore the brain is much more adept at processing images than words.

Regardless of the context of the early care and education setting, visual supports can be used with young children in a home-based early care and education program, center-based early care and education program, preschool/nursery school program or school-age care program.

**For more information on using visual supports, the CICC offers additional tip sheets and a self-study course entitled *Using Visual Supports with Young Children*.**

<https://www.inclusivechildcare.org/resource-library>

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