USE OF VISUAL AIDS TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATION SKILLS

For most people with autism, visual skills are stronger than auditory-verbal skills. You can use these visual strengths to improve the weaker auditory-verbal abilities. Visual aids can take many forms:

1. **Visual choices**

   You can make simple "boards" that present choices of foods, toys, activities or places to go. You can use photos, pictures cut from magazines or pictures you draw yourself. You should put printed words above or below the picture choice. When you ask your child what he wants to eat, or what toy he wants to play with, have him show you on the picture board. If he is non-verbal, he can just point or give you the picture (picture exchange communication system - PECS) while you model the word for him. If he is emerging verbal, prompt him to say the word that matches the picture (you may have to say the word and have him repeat you).

   The benefits of a verbal choice board are that: you can easily see what word your child is trying to say (so you can model the word of his choice, rather than guessing what you think he wants), your child will be less frustrated because he can make his choices known, and he can initiate a request for a desired object or activity without having to wait for your question (he sees the power of communication).

   Here are some examples of visual choice boards:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Snacks</th>
<th>Going Out</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="orange" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="swimming" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="pear" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="library" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="grapes" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="park" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="apple" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="McDonald's" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="cheese" /></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="milk" /></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. **Visual schedules**

You can make an unpredictable world more predictable by giving your child a visual schedule to follow. Depending on his literacy level, the schedule could be made with pictures and words, or words only. The schedule itself is a sheet with empty slots marked with times or simply numbers (think of a daybook or a "to do" list). You will have cards that fit into these slots with daily and special activities on them. At the beginning of the day, you can either put the schedule together with your child, or have the schedule already made up and go through it with him. During the day encourage him to check the schedule to see what is happening next. If he seems agitated during the day and uncertain about changes, again take him to the schedule. Some children may want to cross out or block off the activities that have already happened.

The strength of a schedule is that your child can predict and handle changes. Also, if he gets used to following a schedule, transitions to new schools and other new environments can be made easier.

Here is an example of a visual schedule:
3. Visual "jigs"

A visual "jig" is a picture and word "recipe" to help your child achieve independence in a multi-step task. The multi-step task could be a daily self-help task (eg. brushing teeth) or a play activity (eg. making "Creepy Crawlers"), or an activity at school (eg. making an art activity). Each step should be numbered and directions should combine pictures and words (depends on your child's literacy level).

Visual jigs can be increased in complexity as your child gets older to help him to independently perform a variety of complex tasks (eg. writing a story, cooking, doing a school project).

Following is an example of a visual jig:

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Fruit Salad.

1. Cut banana apple
2. Peel tangerine
3. Mix
4. Eat!
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from "Kinder Krunchies"

Sheila Bell - 2003