Bonnie Blagojevic, Mary Ellin Logue, V. Susan Bennett-Armistead, Billie Taylor, and Erika Neal

Take a Look!

Visual Supports for Learning



Teachers help children learn in many ways. They use examples, teach specific routines, and provide verbal explanations. Some young children, including children with disabilities or those who are learning English, need additional supports. They may not understand what is being said if the speech is too fast, is unclear, or uses unfamiliar words. Children may become confused or feel anxious and overwhelmed. These feelings can affect a child's ability to learn, interact with others, and feel comfortable as a member of the classroom community.

Visual supports, such as photos, drawings, objects, gestures, and print and environmental cues, can help. They are sometimes paired with verbal explanations. They help children know what to do, learn new skills, and feel included. Visual strategies are considerate of diverse learners. They support children who are visual learners and rely on the visual as a key to understanding the spoken word. Some children may need additional time to process what is being said and come up with a response. Visual supports provide additional prompts to help these children understand discussions. The supports remain on view as a reminder of what was said. Visual supports can also communicate messages to families, especially families whose home language is not English.

Visual supports help children understand . . .

1. Where to find things and where things belong.

Use visual cues that match children's developmental and learning needs.

- At the beginning of the year, create shelf labels with a larger image and smaller font (but still large enough for children to see well).
- As the year progresses, consider switching to larger text and smaller images.
- By the end of the year, try using text labels only, with children helping to create or write the labels.







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2. What will happen and when.

Keep these points in mind when creating picture schedules.

- Model the use of picture schedules as part of the daily routine. Post the schedules where children can easily see and use them.
- Match text labels with images, using the words most commonly used in your program to describe that activity. For example, if group time is called circle time, use those exact words.
- Use a flexible system with movable images representing snack, circle time, and so on. This lets you show and discuss changes to routines, transitions, special events, or visitors.





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3. What to do and how to do it.

Explain step-by-step, procedural directions using visual supports.

- When breaking down complex activities into steps, decide if a simpler or more detailed visual will help children master the task. Use images that are clear, uncluttered representations. Have an adult try out the directions before using the visual with children.
- Step-by-step directions may require a lot of teacher involvement initially. Read each step aloud or point as children complete the action. As they master the tasks or can read or review steps independently, provide less direction. Remove the supports when they are no longer needed as a reference.
- Displays can help children review their work and explain a classroom activity to family members or other classroom visitors.





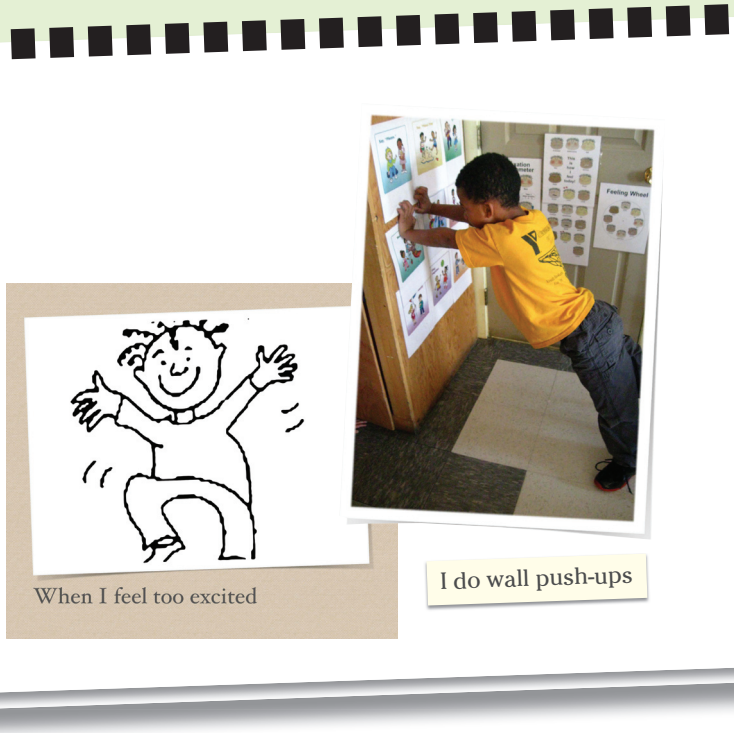


4. How to interact with others.

Offer visual supports to children who need help making friends and successfully interacting with others.

- Create stories that use images with words to provide scripts, or offer video models of appropriate behavior for children to follow in social situations. Photos of children leaning toward each other and making eye contact can show, not just tell, children how to talk and play with peers.
- Provide visual supports that help children focus on and recognize the feelings and perspectives of others, such as feelings faces posters.







5. How to communicate thoughts, feelings, and choices.

Use visual supports to help children communicate.

- Choice boards show children what is available to them. They can select an activity based on the visual information on the board. Start with fewer choices. Add more options or complexity later as children are able to manage them.
- Post images that represent "survival phrases," such as *I am hungry, I am tired,* and *I need to go to the bathroom.* Children can point to these images to communicate their basic needs.

Get started

When deciding which types of visual support strategies to use, consider children's learning abilities and behaviors. Plan when and how to evaluate their effectiveness. Adjust the kinds, frequency of use, placement, or purpose of supports as children's needs change. Make visuals using sturdy materials, such as card stock or file folders. Supports created from these materials are easy to make and long-lasting.

Visual supports provide predictability and structure in the daily routine. They let children take part in the curriculum and understand information. They help children organize their thoughts, expand their ability to communicate, and increase their independence. Visual supports are available and can be created in a variety of formats, including books, posters, games, slideshows, apps, and video.

Visit the Visual Supports Learning Links and Visuals Templates web page, located at www.ccids.umaine.edu/resources/ec/visual-supports.

SUPPORTING DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS

The ideas in this article help teachers plan for the use of visual supports, which are crucial in multilingual classrooms. Along with images, try to print the labels in all the languages of the classroom, with phonetic cues so the adults can talk about what's on the label in each child's language. When multiple languages mean that labels are too big, try using fewer labels. Every child needs to see his or her language in the environment, even if it can't be everywhere. Choose to place print where it can best support children's communication.

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