

# The Reference Shelf

FALL 2011

## Can You Picture This?

—by Dr. Patricia McDaid, SESA Autism/PBIS Specialist

**H**ave you ever lost your datebook? Wanted to cook a favorite meal and misplaced the recipe? Made a “to-do” list and felt great satisfaction at crossing off your last item for the day? If you replied yes to any of these questions, you use visual supports. The phrase “visual supports” refers to pictures, signs, and symbols that provide important information, serve as task reminders, or serve as a way to organize tasks and/or time. When we use items such as calendars, checklists, or sticky notes, we are using visual support strategies.

Visual supports are useful ways to provide information because they are not dependent on written language to convey a message. Although some visual supports may include text, for example a sign with a “no smoking” symbol might also include the words “no smoking,” the message is clearly understood whether or not the text is understood. Below are examples of the types of visual supports we see all around us.

If you are looking for other examples of community-based visual supports, you need go no further than the closest large international airport. In this environment, visual supports (symbols) allow important information to be communicated clearly regardless of the language spoken by the individual. As someone who has traveled extensively, I know how much I depend on these “language free” supports to successfully meet my needs when I am in a non-English speaking environment. For example, on a trip to Poland I visited a town where very few people spoke English. After a morning of sight seeing, I sat down in a lovely restaurant to have some lunch. Then I was presented with a menu written in Polish by a waiter who spoke only Polish. After several attempts to communicate, the waiter excused himself and returned with a picture menu. We were both very relieved that we could communicate effectively using pictures!



Visual supports are also a very effective educational tool. Teachers across Alaska, and the rest of the nation, are harnessing the power of visuals in their schools and classrooms. Several SESA programs and grants provide training to Alaskan teachers and community members about the use of visual supports.

SESA’s Alaska GAINS grant provides training and technical assistance to pre-school teachers and support staff in school district-operated programs across Alaska. The focus of the training and follow-up coaching is early childhood positive behavioral interventions and supports. In GAINS pre-school classrooms, teachers use visual supports to teach behavioral expectations and classroom routines, give choices, and provide the daily schedule.

The Alaska GAINS training curriculum is based on the Teaching Pyramid (a visual support in and of itself!) designed by the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations of Early Learning (CSEFEL) located at Vanderbilt University. CSEFEL is a national technical assistance program that develops and provides training and technical assistance materials that reflect evidence-based practices for promoting children’s social and emotional development and preventing challenging behaviors. The CSEFEL materials include many visual supports for use in pre-school classrooms as tools for teaching appropriate behavior and addressing challenging behavior.

Two of the most important goals of the Alaska GAINS project are directly related to the use of visual supports. The primary goal of Alaska GAINS is to increase the number of evidence-based “best practices” in the area of positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) in Alaskan pre-school classrooms. The second goal of the project is to increase the number of culturally appropriate and culturally relevant early childhood PBIS interventions used in Alaska pre-schools.

One of the primary goals of any PBIS approach, regard-



less of the age of the students, is to prevent challenging behavior before it happens. A key component of preventing challenging behavior is to ensure that students know exactly what they should be doing, and how to do it. When working with preschoolers, many of them are learning the “rules of school” (i.e. how to stand in line, how to wait their turn, etc.) for the first time. Imagine the challenge of teaching twenty 3-year-olds to stand in line. Now imagine how much easier the task would be if there were a line of “footprints” on the floor for the children to stand upon. That is just one example of the strategies put in place in many Alaska GAINS classrooms.

Visual supports can also be used to help teach preschool children higher level thinking skills such as problem-solving. Although it is not developmentally appropriate to expect 3 and 4-year-old children to independently solve their own social problems (i.e. if one child takes a toy another is playing with, preschoolers can be expected to begin to generate solutions other than the use of challenging behavior to solve problems. The CSEFEL training materials include a tool called the “Solutions Kit” which is designed to support young children in learning to generate alternate solutions, which is the first step on the more complex process of problem-solving. The CSEFEL “Solutions Kit” uses visual supports (drawings) to teach and prompt such alternate solutions as: sharing a toy, using words, asking nicely, saying “please stop,” and getting a teacher. However, this wonderful tool does not match the cultural context or life experience of preschoolers living in Alaska Native communities.

Research in early childhood education tells us that young children learn best when there is a relationship between classroom activities and the children’s daily life

experiences. Additionally, in many Alaskan school districts there is a growing emphasis on teaching Alaska Native language and culture in the schools. In an attempt to address both of these facts, Alaska GAINS staff has developed culturally appropriate versions of the CSEFEL “Solutions Kit” for use in Yu’pik and Gwich’en communities. An Iñupiaq version of the kit is currently in development.

The PBIS Center of Alaska, which is housed at SESA and staffed by SESA specialists, also includes the use of visual supports in its trainings. In fact, the entire model for school-wide PBIS programs is captured in a single visual, the PBIS triangle. Also, one of the first tasks schools complete, once they have finished their preliminary training, is to create and hang posters all around the school as reminders of their school-wide behavioral expectations. This strategy reminds both students and staff of the behavior that is expected in all the areas of the school building.

Perhaps the best-known application of visual supports in the field of education is with individuals with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Individuals with autism spectrum disorder (and other brain-based learning challenges such as fetal alcohol spectrum disorder) can experience a significant increase in their communication, independence, and behavioral self-management through the use of visual supports. There is a growing body of research that promotes the use of visual supports as an evidence-based practice for individuals with autism across the age range. This includes using visual supports to: increase spontaneous communication, replace challenging behavior with communication, increase task engagement, encourage social interactions, increase problem solving, decrease difficulty with transitions, complete self-help routines independently, and increase on-task behavior.

It is not surprising then to find that the most frequent users of visual supports are SESA’s Autism Specialists and the staff of the Alaska Autism Resource Center (AARC, which is housed at SESA). The AARC includes information on the use of visual supports in a variety of its trainings and has hosted a distance class on creating visual supports. The AARC staff sent materials to make the supports in advance to the participants and then hosted, via video-teleconference, a “Make ‘n Take” for a variety of different visual supports. SESA Autism Specialists use visual supports so frequently on their student service trips that they often carry extra supports with them to leave with the school, or create





the supports on site with the help of the teacher or para-professional who serves the student with ASD.

Maci Brown-Spica, a SESA Autism Specialist who recently relocated from Minnesota, describes the power of using visuals with a student with ASD like this:

One of my favorite visual strategy triumph stories takes place in Maplewood, Minnesota. I had a student who came to me with no schedule, no functional communication system, high sensory needs, and many challenging behaviors. To begin, I started an object schedule to help him transition from tasks inside his room to activities in other parts of the building. A ball was used for gym, a piece of silk for sensory time, and a cup for lunchtime. With time, consistency, and persistence we were able to teach the student how to follow a schedule. Simultaneously we began teaching the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), and magical things started to happen. My student’s challenging behaviors decreased significantly, his vocabulary and environmental awareness increased, and before I knew it he was utilizing a more complex schedule using symbolic pictures. Later in the year, we were able to introduce task schedules within activities, duration maps to track time, and reinforcement boards to act as an individualized token economy. Visuals are great for teaching staff too. With more visuals to support my student, his independence increased and I felt more comfortable taking a sick day if I needed to. I knew that any adult could come into my classroom and navigate through the day (just like my student) utilizing visual strategies.

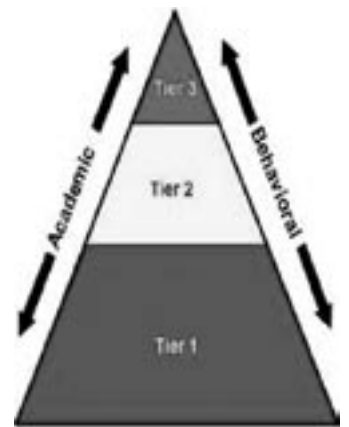
Individuals with ASD are known to be strong visual learners. Temple Grandin (a scientist, author, and self-advocate with ASD) actually entitled her first book, “Thinking in Pictures.” In addition to being strong visual learners, many individuals with ASD have great difficulty using and understanding spoken language. In fact, one of the three primary diagnostic criteria for autism spectrum disorder is impairment in communication. This is further defined as a delay in or total lack of spoken language or (for those

individuals with speech) significant difficulty initiating or maintaining conversation with others. Some individuals with ASD actually possess clearly articulated speech, but cannot use this speech to communicate a clear message to others. One reason this may occur is the presence of delayed and/or spontaneous echolalia. With spontaneous echolalia, the individual with ASD repeats the words spoken to them while with delayed echolalia the individual repeats words and phrases heard at another time. Delayed echolalia frequently manifests as repetition of dialog from favorite movies or lines from favorite songs.

The Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) is one example of an evidence-based intervention that utilizes visuals as a tool to support communication. PECS is a six-phased program that enables individuals with ASD (and related developmental disabilities) to use pictures to spontaneously communicate with others.

Individuals begin the program learning to exchange a single picture of a preferred object for that object. Then, using a systematic approach over time, the individual learns to request using short phrases and eventually, full sentences (see above, pictures created using Mayer-Johnson’s “Boardmaker” software). As individuals with ASD move through the program they learn to expand vocabulary, answer questions, and comment on their environment and activities. One of the primary functions of the challenging behavior of individuals with ASD is communication. Therefore, although not specifically described in the PECS protocol, giving individuals with ASD a way to appropriately refuse an activity and make choices across all environments and activities is generally a very important aspect of their communication program.

In addition to serving as a communication tool for individuals with ASD, visual supports can also help the



individual to gather meaningful and relevant information from the environment and thus be able to navigate that environment more successfully and more independently. Visual schedules are a powerful way to represent time and transitions to students with ASD and related brain-based disabilities. Visual schedules help teachers and their students to establish routines, anticipate transitions, establish the concept of “finished,” and clarify behavioral and academic expectations. Using a visual schedule is a very effective way in which to decrease the transition-related challenging behavior in individuals with ASD. It is even more beneficial when paired with other visual supports

such as a visual timer.

Due to the effectiveness of visual supports with individuals with ASD and other related brain-based disabilities, it is important to maximize their use with this group of learners. However, it is also important to remember that visual supports exist all around us. The use of pointing, gestures, pantomiming, and simple sign language can also provide visual support to communication. Teaching an individual to observe the other people in an environment and match his or her behavior to that of others (i.e. “do what the other kids are doing”) is an important life skill, especially for the overall success of individuals with ASD.

To conclude, visual supports are all around us and can be used as an effective, evidence-based practice in a variety of educational settings. Visual supports serve as a source of information that is a permanent product that is always available for reference. Visual supports also cross language barriers and provided specialized support for individuals with communication challenges. They can be individualized for use by non-disabled children and adults or by students with intensive needs. For individuals with ASD who are unable to communicate their needs and wants in any other way, a picture may truly be worth a thousand words. ■

## PECS

### Picture Exchange Communication System —by Maci Spica

The Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) is an evidence-based practice used to systematically teach individuals who are nonverbal or nonfunctional communicators the purpose of communication and provides them with a low technological, functional communication tool. PECS was developed in 1985 by Linda Frost, a speech pathologist and Andy Bondy, a clinical psychologist at the Delaware Autistic Program (Bondy & Frost, 1994; Collet-Klingenberg, 2008). PECS is broken into six phases which scaffold the skills needed to be a functional communicator. In phase one, the student learns to physically exchange a visual picture for a preferred item. The second phase consists of the student searching through their environment for the desired visual picture and appropriate communication partner. In phase three, the student will learn picture discrimination, followed by a correspondence check. Phase four requires the student to build sentences using a sentence strip and an “I want” and visual picture symbol. In phase five, the student complete phases one through four after given the verbal cue, “What do you want?” Finally, in phase

six the student will learn to comment using attributes and new symbols, such as “I see,” “I hear,” “I smell,” and “I feel.” After the completion of phase six the student should be able to request and comment with multiple communication partners in varying environments (Frost & Bondy, 2002; Collet-Klingenberg, 2008). ■



*Reyna Sigurdson and Maci Spica demonstrate phase 4 PECS.*

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# Visual Strategies: Valuable Support At Any Age

Linda Hodgdon  
M.ED., CCC-SLP

Can you imagine life without your calendar, your Blackberry or iPhone? Are you a person who would have difficulty surviving without those yellow sticky notes hanging in strategic places to remind you of important things? What about menus, shopping lists, recipes and traffic signs? Don't forget those "easy-to-assemble step-by-step" instructions that come with lots of purchases.

You and I use visual strategies to help us manage our life routines successfully. They help us organize our thinking and remember what to do.

Visual supports help us accomplish activities and obligations more completely and with less stress. We just don't call them "visual strategies" when we use them.

## Understanding the Learning Strengths of Individuals with ASD

Most individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders (Autism, Asperger's Syndrome, PDD and more) demonstrate strength in understanding visual information.

The majority of individuals with

ASD understand what they SEE better than what they HEAR.

They tend to be visual learners. Visual strategies provide information in a form that many of these individuals understand more easily than auditory information.

Here's just one important concept to understand. Speech is transient. That means after it is spoken it disappears. Now imagine the student who takes a bit longer than others to pay attention when you are talking to him. Or think about the individual who gets distracted by something else in the environment. If he is not "tuned

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in,” the spoken message can be gone before he even realizes someone is talking to him...IF he realizes someone is talking to him. It’s very likely that information will be missed.

This is just one example of why these students can experience difficulty understanding. There can be many more.

**As a *communication partner*, it is critically important for YOU to understand that these individuals generally understand less than we think they do.**

Communication confusions will affect how they are able to participate in social situations and other life activities.

## More About Visual Strategies

Visual strategies are things we see that enhance communication or give us information. Sometimes we call them visual tools or visual supports. It’s important to realize that visual strategies accomplish many purposes. They provide a way for students to comprehend more about what is happening in their lives.

Visual tools help preschoolers acquire new skills. They provide support for students in elementary through high school to manage everything from transitions to grasping confusing social events. Visual tools give information, support memory and help organize thinking. Adults benefit from visual supports to help them achieve independence and successfully participate in their life opportunities.

## A Preference for Visual Information

You and I use visual tools for organizing our own lives. Our students with communication and learning challenges can benefit from the same tools we use, however, they need more visual supports than we do.

That’s why we create specially

designed tools for establishing a schedule, providing choices, sharing information, giving directions, posting rules, teaching skills, supporting social situations and lots more. There are endless opportunities to use visual tools to help individuals of all ages with ASD to achieve personal success and greater independence.

Photographs, line drawings, computer clip art, pictures from magazines, food labels, signs, logos, real objects and written language can be used to support communication. Visual strategies are not all pictures. Anything you SEE can be a useful communication tool. The goal is to use any kind of visual supports that our students will understand.

Currently, there has been an explosion of applications (APPS) for iPhones, iPads, and similar electronic tools that expand the options for visual support. In addition, video has emerged as a powerful alternative mode to provide visual learning opportunities.

## Aren’t Visual Strategies Just for Young Children?

Definitely NO. This is one of the most common misunderstandings about using visual strategies. Visual supports are appropriate for individuals of all ages.

The visual tools we use for younger children may look different or be used for different purposes than those for older students or adults. But visual tools can benefit adults for the same reasons they benefit younger children.

Schedules and calendars are a good example. They give information about what is happening in the student’s life by helping him manage transitions and anticipate activities. That kind of information is important for any age. But what is really important to understand is that a schedule is just one tool in a giant toolbox of visual

strategies that can help individuals of any age achieve success.

## Modifying Visual Supports as Young Children Grow Older

Some people understand the value of visual strategies for younger children, but they are concerned about continuing to use them as children grow older. They ask, “When do you start to eliminate the visuals?” “Won’t he look handicapped if he uses visual strategies?” In other words, people see that the visual supports are helpful but they have concerns that those visual tools will not be appropriate when the student matures.

It’s really hard to answer that question. Perhaps this should be the question instead: “How do you adjust visual supports so they continue to be valuable for students as they grow older?” Our goal is not to eliminate visual supports, but modify visual tools so they continue to be useful and meet the individual’s changing needs.

Here’s an example. Going to the grocery store is a typical family activity.

Arthur, age 4, has a little picture card in his pocket that Mom gives him before they go grocery shopping. She told him he would get some cookies at the end of the trip. When they walk down the cookie aisle, Mom has Arthur take the cookie picture out of his pocket. She tells him he gets to choose a box of cookies to put in the shopping basket. This little strategy helps Arthur manage his behavior in the store because he knows he will earn a treat.

Lisa is twelve. She uses a picture shopping list so she can help Mom find the groceries to put in the cart.

Tom is an adult who shops by himself. He prepares his shopping list on his iPhone. (Did you know there’s an APP for that?) The shopping list on his phone helps him complete his errand independently.

# Our goal is not to eliminate visual supports, but modify visual tools so they continue to be useful.

## Other Ways Visual Tools have been Used for All Ages

Individuals can learn and understand much better when visual strategies are integrated into situations. The use of visual supports is determined by purpose, not by age. Here are some examples.



<http://itunes.apple.com/ca/app/needfood-the-visual-grocery/id408216610?mt=8>

## Following directions

Giving directions visually can work really well for any age. Here is what one Mom wrote:

*I attended one of your visual strategies conferences. Your presentation was amazing. A few days after attending the conference I was at my wits end with trying to get my son with Asperger's Syndrome to get his pajamas on to go to bed.*

*I was frustrated because I was having to "tell" him (yes, I know) over and over again to get them on. This had been going on for a long, long time (years) and it was getting pretty old.*

*All of a sudden your conference came to mind and I realized the problem was with me. I was only talking and that is not how he works. Instead of feeling frustrated, I wrote on a card, "Get your pajamas on NOW!" and calmly handed it to him.*

*I was totally surprised when his eyes bugged out. He got up and said, "Okay." He promptly got his pajamas on. After I recovered from total shock at how well that worked, I wrote on the card, "Thank you. I love you" and got a big smile from him.*

*I don't always remember to use visuals, but what a difference it makes when I do!*

*Michelle, Mom*

## Handling a significant life change

Some life events are difficult to understand because everything is new or unfamiliar. Pam, a member of a student's treatment team wrote:

*I had a student whose life was about to change in a major way. His grandfather, who was his favorite person in the whole wide world, was diagnosed*

*with cancer. This boy's family was concerned about how they would explain what was happening and wondered if he would understand why he didn't see his grandfather anymore.*

*We decided that we would use story books to explain what was happening to his grandfather. We created stories showing the relationship between this child and his grandfather, what was happening to his grandfather, and how the relationship was changing.*

*We covered the time of his grandfather's diagnosis, hospitalization, hospice, his death, funeral, and burial. This was a Christian family who also wanted their son to know that his grandfather had gone to live with Jesus, so we incorporated that into the story too.*

*After his grandfather's death, the young man's mother reported that prior to grandfather's illness, the boy would frequently run to the window, anxiously awaiting the visits from his grandfather.*

*After his grandfather's death, he no longer did this. The visual strategies worked.*

## Teaching new skills and delicate topics

Teens are faced with learning about body changes in themselves and others. Marianne, Caity's mom, wrote about how she created a visual tool to help her daughter handle a personal situation.

*I wanted Caity to be ready to handle the hygiene aspects of having her period. I made a step-by-step visual tool and put it into a folder titled "Caity's Health Folder." She kept it at school with her binders*



# The use of visual supports is determined by purpose, not age.

and other folders. She was the only one who knew the contents. I added an envelope on the inside of the folder for “supplies” so she would be prepared.

## Making social decisions

Social decisions can be difficult to think through and understand. Putting the information in a concrete visual format can help individuals make better choices and respond appropriately. A visual support like *Doing the Right Thing* puts the information on paper to help an individual sort through the options and their implications.

## Handling difficult situations

Giving information about potentially difficult situations can help individuals manage them better. Events Can Change is a tool to prepare individuals for situations where something unexpected happens. If they know what to do, they can usually handle the event better than if something is a huge surprise.

## Important Points to Remember

Our goal is to identify when someone is having difficulty or needs some extra support to become successful. When you target a need, consider what kind of visual tool or strategy can give the information or support necessary. It’s not a question of “if” but rather a question of “how.”

**The use of visual strategies is determined by need, not by the person’s age.**

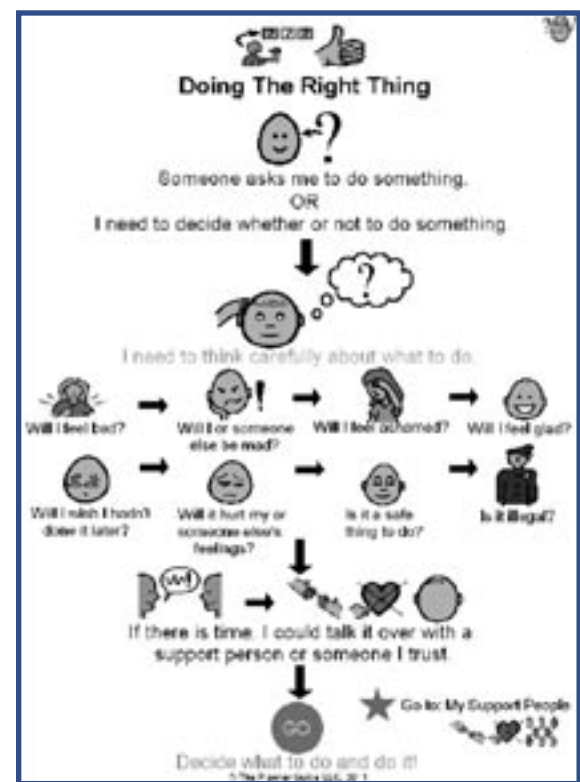
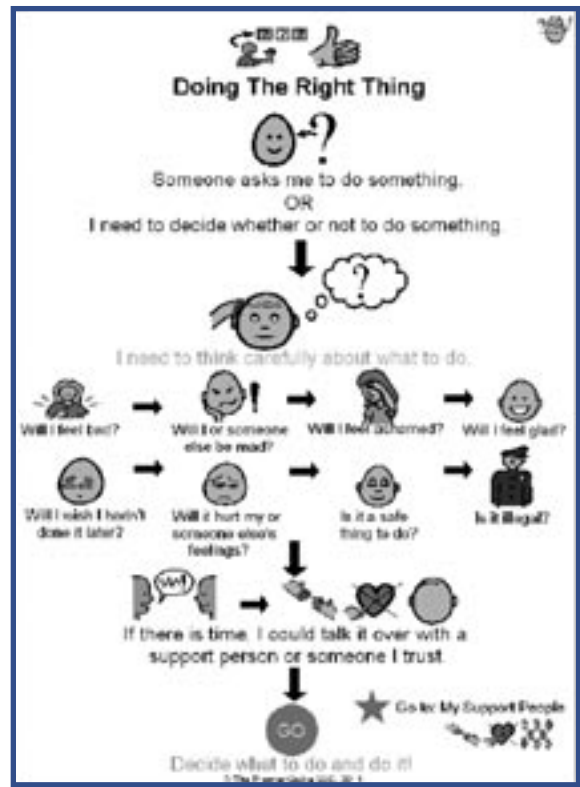
As our students get older, those electronic tools become socially desirable options to accomplish many goals. Just keep focused on the reasons to use visual tools. And by now, there’s probably an APP for that. ■

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