Visual Supports within an Inclusive Learning Environment

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
um Oideachas Speisialta
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for Special Education

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This resource was developed by Senior Speech and Language Therapists working with The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in collaboration with Occupational Therapy and Educator colleagues.
The content of the booklet is based on research evidence and the therapists' professional experiences of working in schools.

The resource includes information, strategies and resources to assist teachers to use visuals to support students' communication and participation in school.

As of 2024, and to the best of our knowledge, this document uses language, and, encourages practice that is reflective of current research and evidence. We recognise that language, phrasing and terminology considered best practice at this time may evolve and future iterations of NCSE Therapy resources will continue to endeavour to include the most current language and practice available.

Digital versions of many of the visual templates highlighted in this resource are available on an NCSE Padlet and can be accessed through this QR code:

Contents

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Inclusive Learning Environment

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Introduction

Communication is the ability to send and understand messages exchanged through a common language or system of signs, symbols or behaviour, for physical, emotional or social purposes (The Communication Trust 2013). Within the context of education, communication serves as the foundation to access and engage with the curriculum, it is vital for the wellbeing of students and in preparing them for life (Kearns et al, 2015).

Visual supports are integral to Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a Total Communication Approach (TCA), and creating an inclusive learning environment. A TCA involves modelling, accepting and validating all means of communication, including manual sign, objects, gestures, symbols and devices. A TCA is neurodiversity-affirmative and aligns with the social model of disability. It promotes inclusivity, is person-centred and builds on existing strengths. A TCA enables students with communication difficulties to express their feelings, participate authentically in interactions, make choices, understand what is being said to them, express their wants, needs and preferences and develop relationships, all of which form part of the Communication Bill Of Rights (Brady et al., 2016).

Visual Supports within an
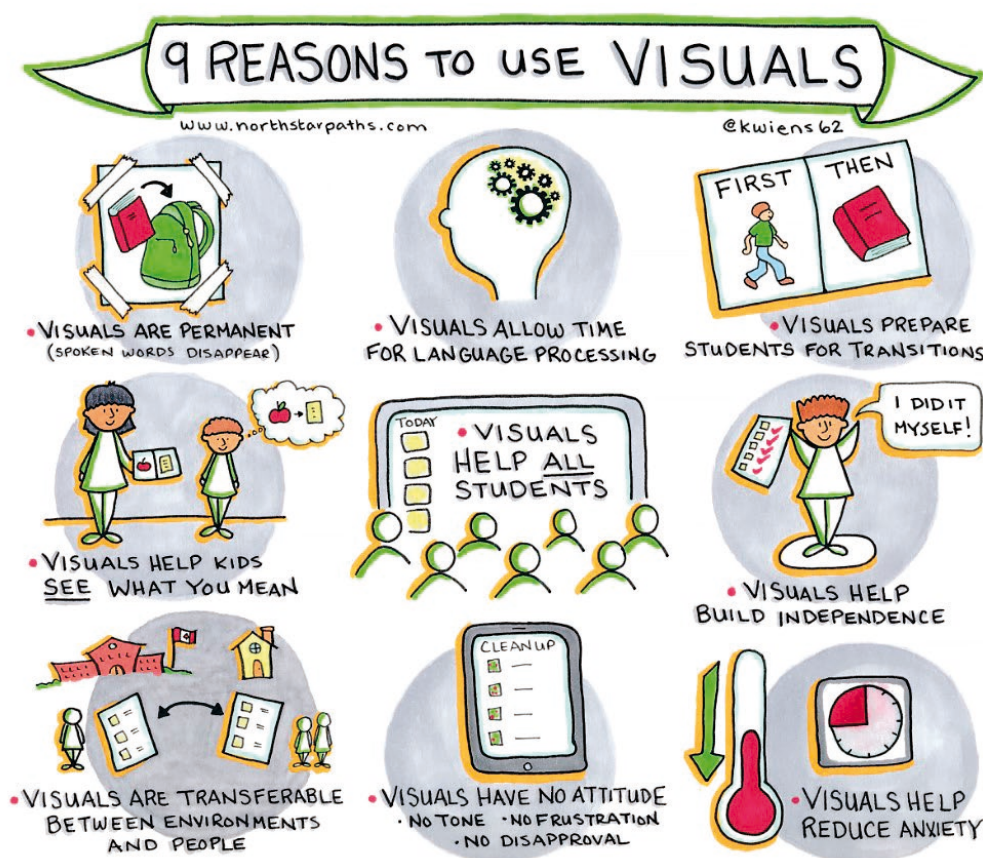Inclusive Learning Environment
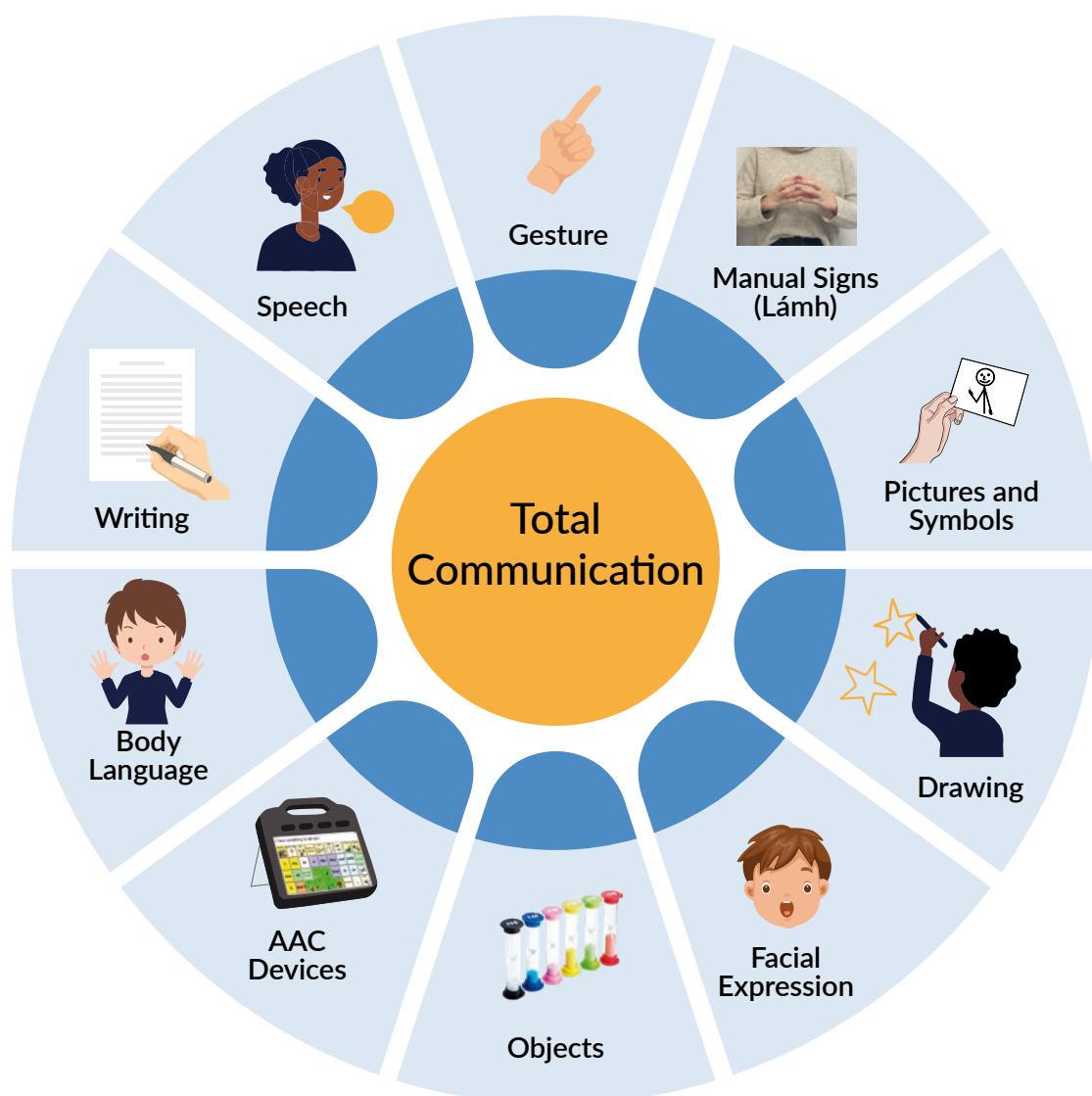
Why are Visuals so Important?

'Visual supports', or, 'visuals', include using objects, photos, signs, symbols or pictures in a way that supports understanding, expression and social inclusion and participation.

When visuals are implemented in all classrooms and shared spaces as part of a Total Communication Approach (TCA) they support the creation and promotion of an inclusive learning environment where students are better supported to understand and communicate throughout the day. They provide multiple means of representation and engagement in learning and school life.
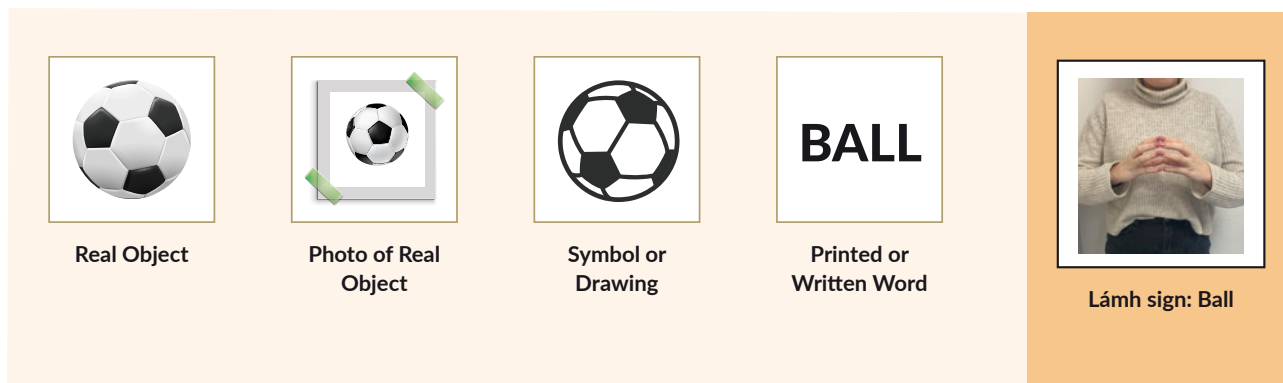
Visual supports should be included in a variety of forms, for example; whole class visual schedules, individualised schedules, choice boards, communication boards etc.

Visuals support ALL students. The visuals we put in place for students with additional needs can benefit all students in classrooms and should be used as a universal, whole-class strategy. Students without additional support needs report using visual timetables as often as those with additional needs (Rutherford et al., 2020). Within the same research mainstream, primary-school age students reported that visuals assisted their independence, brought more predictability to the school day and thus resulted in less dependence on classroom teachers at times of transition.

9 REASONS TO USE VISUALS

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- VISUALS ARE PERMANENT (SPOKEN WORDS DISAPPEAR)
- VISUALS ALLOW TIME FOR LANGUAGE PROCESSING
- VISUALS PREPARE STUDENTS FOR TRANSITIONS
- VISUALS HELP KIDS SEE WHAT YOU MEAN
- VISUALS HELP ALL STUDENTS
- VISUALS HELP BUILD INDEPENDENCE
- VISUALS ARE TRANSFERABLE BETWEEN ENVIRONMENTS AND PEOPLE
- VISUALS HAVE NO ATTITUDE · NO TONE · NO FRUSTRATION · NO DISAPPROVAL
- VISUALS HELP REDUCE ANXIETY

Types of Visuals Supports

A range of items can be used as visual supports. Some of the commonly used visual symbols include:

Real Object	**Photo of Real Object**	**Symbol or Drawing**	**Printed or Written Word** BALL	**Lámh sign: Ball**

In the past, we thought of the types of visual symbols as a 'hierarchy' which had to be worked through. We now know that there is **no requirement to start at 'Real Objects'** and work through the types of visual symbols in a hierarchical way.

Remember: Choosing the type of visual you use with your class will depend on your students' comprehension level.

Examples of Whole Class Visual Supports

Understanding Daily Routines – Whole Class Visual Schedules

Visual schedules are a vital resource in the classroom for all students to support them to understand the structure of their day. Consistency in using and referring to a classroom visual schedule can support predictability and increase feelings of safety for students. Knowing what is coming next and when can ease anxieties and help students to transition smoothly between activities or subjects. A visual schedule works best when teachers refer to it consistently across the day, particularly at transition times.

Circle Time	**Maths**	**Small Break**	**Writing**
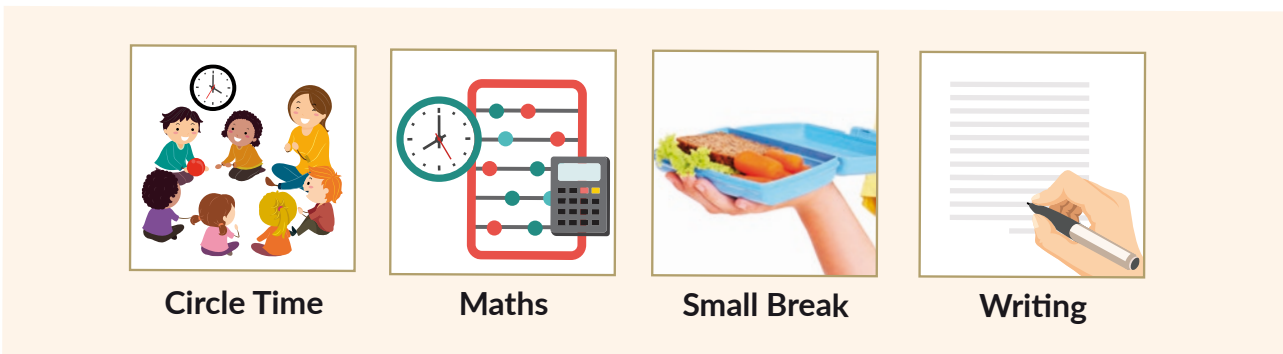
Making Choices

Supporting choice making promotes independence and meaningfully involves students in the decision making process. Some students need help to make choices; visual supports can assist these students to be active participants in their daily routine. Choices can be presented to the student using either objects or pictures. The number of choices you offer a student will depend on the level of their understanding. See example choice board templates:


I   choose

I   choose
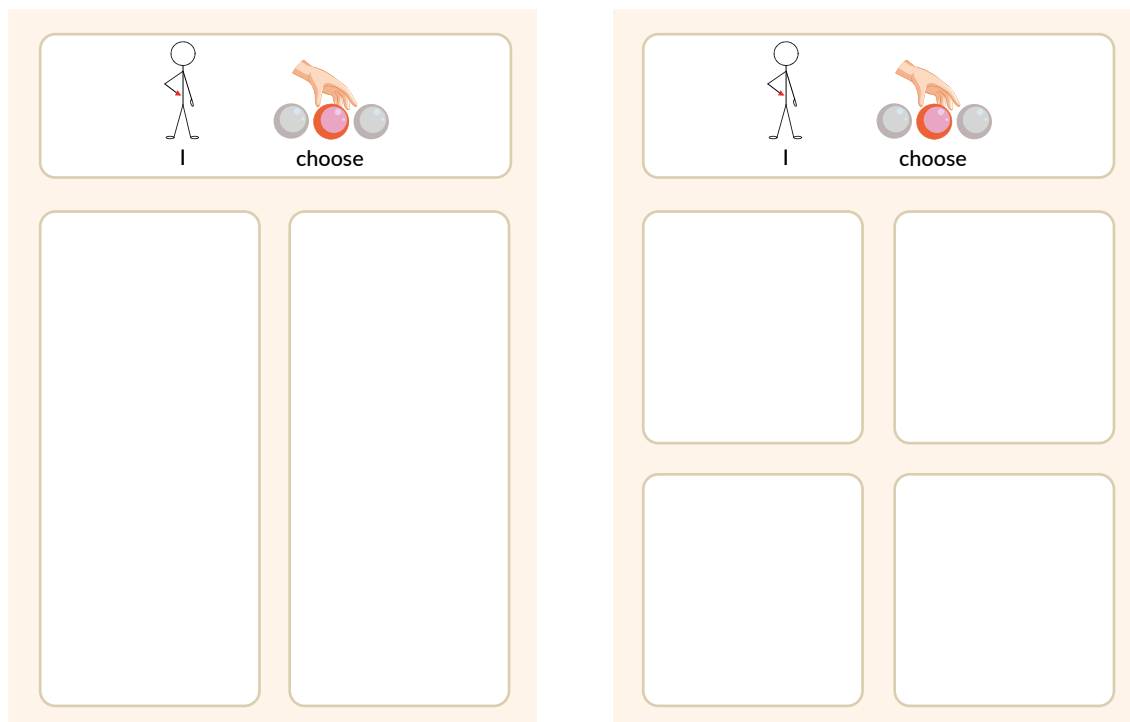
Making Transitions

Transitions form a large part of every school day. Visuals can support students to transition from one activity to the next. They can increase predictability and be used before, during and after a transition. Using visual aids such as sand timers and countdown strips can help a student to know a transition is coming and when to expect it to happen.

Countdown Strip

Críochnaithe

'Now-Next' and 'Now-Next-Then' Boards

The use of 'Now-Next' and 'Now-Next-Then' boards can be supportive for individual students who benefit from tasks being broken down and need help to transition from one task to the next. They are for sharing information about a transition to/from an activity, place or lesson. They should not be used to elicit compliance or as an 'earning board'.
It can be useful to use a 'finished' envelope/box to support a student to understand that an activity has ended before starting the next task.

Now	Next

Finished

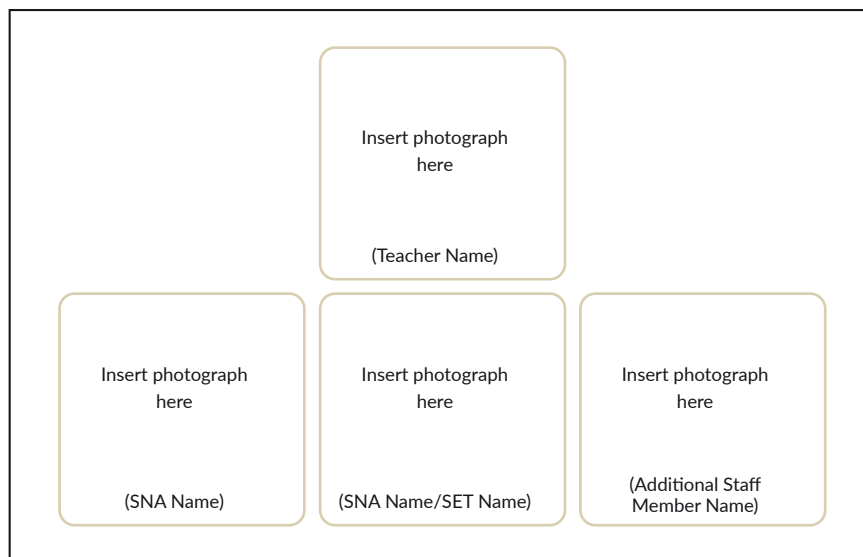| Now	Next	Then

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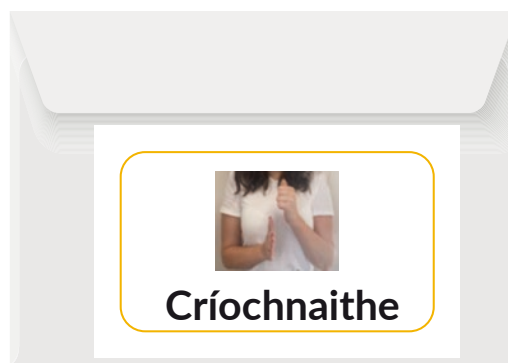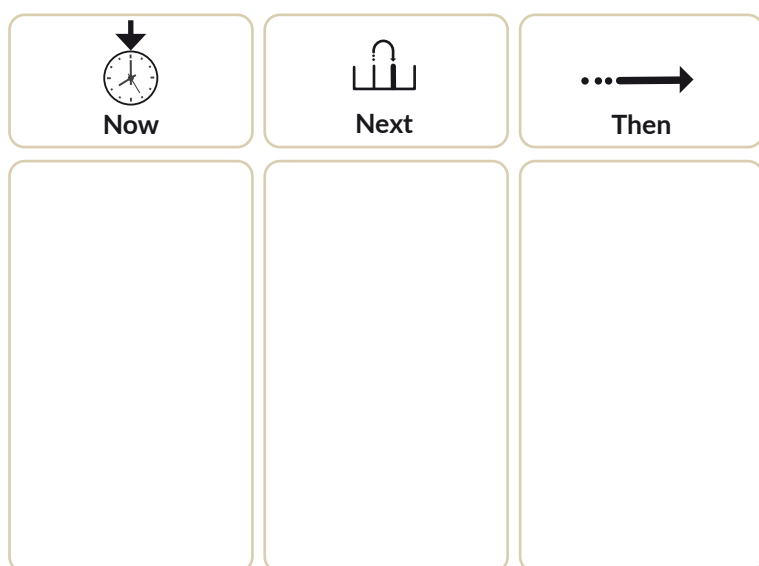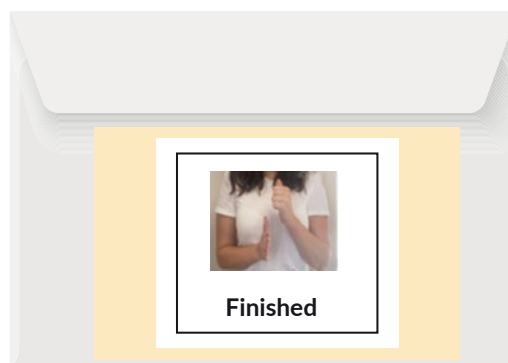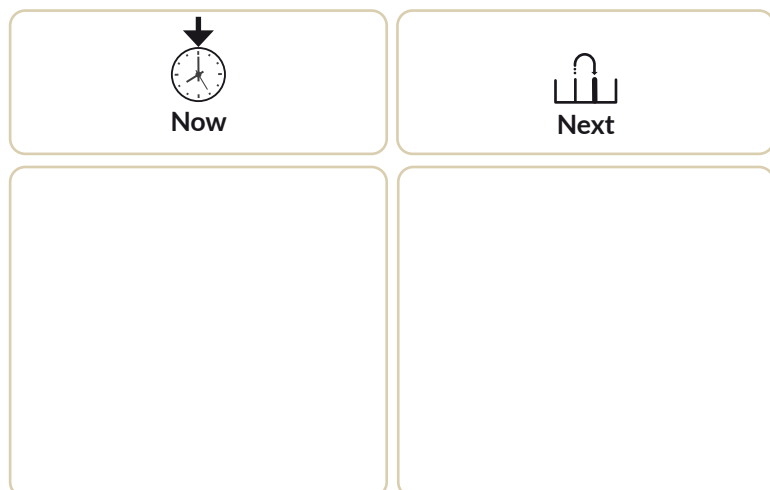
Classroom Door Visuals

Including a photo of the relevant teacher and SNA(s) on the door of a classroom is an effective way to create more predictability for ALL students. Many students benefit from knowing not only what is going to happen in their day but also WHO will be there. This can be updated daily should there be a change of staff. For example, if a staff member job-shares or is absent from school. This ensures students start the day with predictability. This form of wayfinding can also encourage new students and visitors to the school to find their destinations, understand where they are and maintain a sense of orientation independently.


Examples of visuals for teachers around the whole school

Insert photograph here

(Teacher Name)

Insert photograph here

(SNA Name)

Insert photograph here

(SNA Name/SET Name)

Insert photograph here

(Additional Staff Member Name)

Supporting Independence

Using visuals to represent each step of a routine can assist students to develop independence in familiar self-care routines e.g. handwashing routine, toileting routine, dressing routine or classroom tasks. Having visuals available to show students what will happen next can reduce stress and anxiety as it adds predictability to the task.

| Turn water on | Wet hands | Soap on hands | Rub hands | Rinse hands | Turn water off | Dry hands |
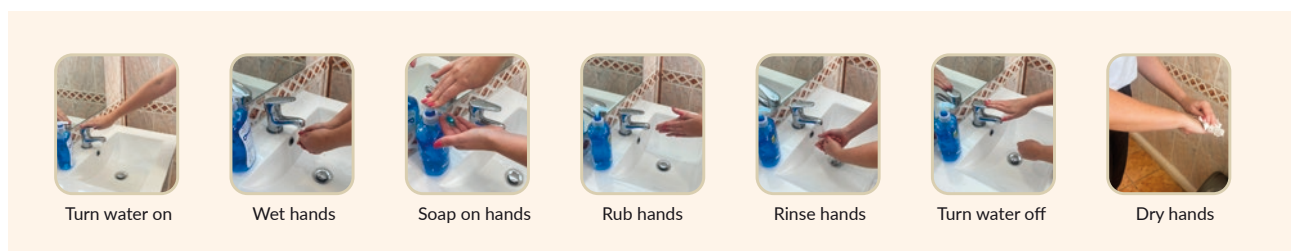
Breaking Down Routines

Providing visuals which break down routines is an effective whole-class support. These visuals can support students to understand the sequence of daily routines, reduce anxiety and increase predictability and independence. As with all visual supports in the classroom, these may be essential to some students in your class but beneficial to many others too.

In this example, the student is supported to understand the routine of what they do when they arrive to school in the morning. They can take the 'coat' symbol off their schedule and place it over the hook as they hang up their coat. They then put their lunchbox into the basket and stick the symbol from their schedule on to a matching visual on their basket. They do the same when they hang up their bag. At the end of the day, the student can be supported to understand the routine of what they do when they are going home by doing this in reverse, sticking the pictures back on to their schedule as they go so it will be ready for the next morning.

Morning Routine

Coat	Lunch	Bag
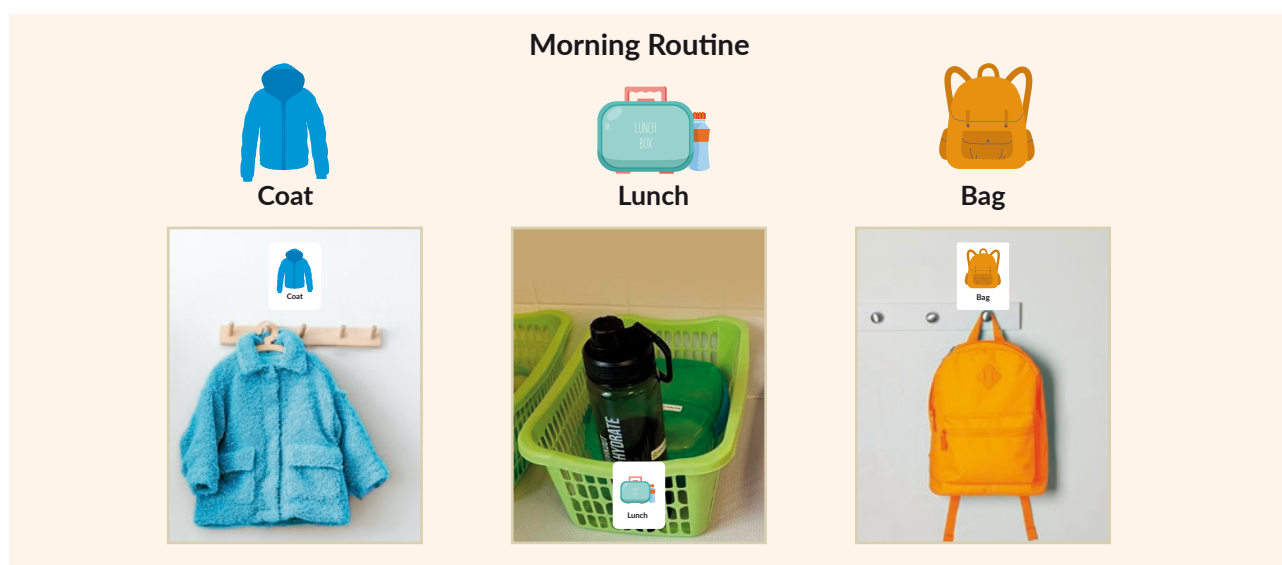
Understanding Expectations

Using visuals can help students to understand what is expected of them; for example, when they are waiting for their turn. Visuals also support students to understand expectations for certain situations; for example, the expectations of what they can do when using the quiet space.

Waiting

Not time yet

Almost time

Ready to go

Using the Quiet Space

1	1 person at a time
2	Set the timer
3	Choose a strategy
4	Use the strategy quietly
5	Tidy up and return to group

A Whole School Approach to Visual Supports

As students progress through school, transitioning from class to class, the types of visual supports in their classroom can look very different each year and the implementation of visual supports by each teacher often differs. This places a demand on the student to learn, and re-learn, visual supports each year. This may cause a delay in the visuals being; understood, meaningful, and, serving their intended purpose for students. It can be helpful to develop a consistent visual support school guidance document/protocol so that visuals are standardised across the whole school. This ensures students are not required to re-learn these visual supports when they change class or teacher.

When all teachers have guidance to follow, visual supports become embedded into school practice. This enables the creation and growth of an inclusive and supportive learning environment for all students. Strategic planning and the development of a consistent visual support school guidance document/protocol ensures that maximum benefit will be gained from the combined and cumulative efforts of teachers in implementing visual supports each year. It is also vital that class teachers, special education teachers and SNAs have a shared understanding of their relative responsibilities in implementing such supports.

Within a school guidance document/protocol there should be specific guidance regarding the visual's size, font, font size, font placement, overall format and layout and the representation level (object, photo, and symbol) of whole class visual supports, and potentially individualised visual supports. There should also be an outline of the standardised visuals used by the school, such as choice boards or now/next boards.

St Ann's Visual Support Policy 2024
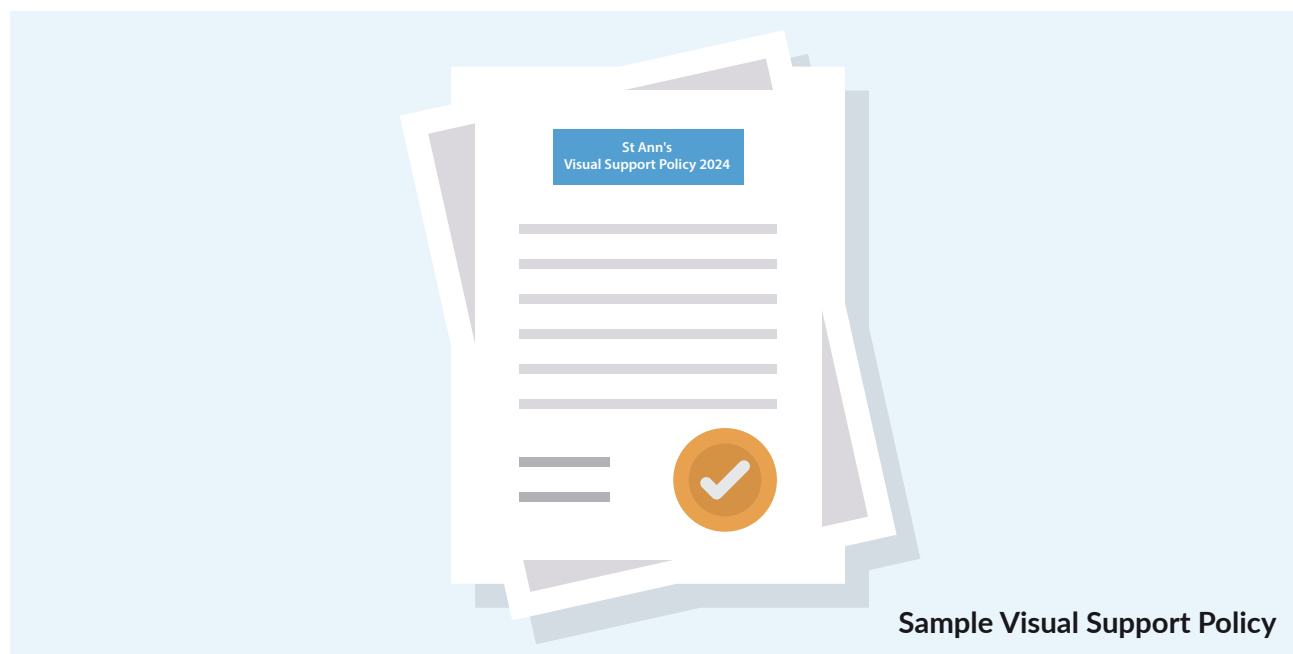
Sample Visual Support Policy

An example school guidance document/protocol can be found in the padlet accompanying this document. This protocol was drawn up following extensive consultations between therapists (SLT/OT), school management, teachers and SNAs.

School Feedback

The implementation of consistent visual supports, as per the school protocol, has positively impacted students:

> It has made a big impact on pupils; anxiety has lessened as they know what to expect. More independence.

> Transitioning to and from the classroom, and from one activity to the next, is much easier for some children.

> Choice boards have helped with challenging behaviours.

Teachers have also reported positive impacts:

> My teaching day runs smoother. There are less behaviours as students know what's happening.

> I'm able to work through more learning objectives, and the day flows with greater ease.

School management and Principals have commented that:

> The roll out of a standardised visuals across all classrooms throughout the school has benefitted all students and staff.

> Our visual support policy has led to a level of consistency and continuity that we haven't had before. All students understand them and the same process is in place from year to year.

# Top Tips for Implementation of Visual Supports

Standardise:
Standardising visuals across the whole school, ensures students are not required to re-learn visual supports when they change class or teacher.

Be Consistent:
Ensure all staff members e.g. class teacher, SNA, SET use the visual support in the same way each time, especially when first introducing the visual support.
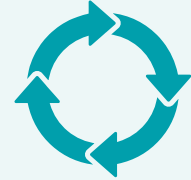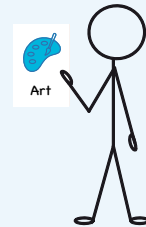
Repeat Repeat:
Lots of exposure and repetition may be needed before the benefits and effects of the visual support are apparent.

Make Visuals Interactive:
Refer to the visual supports and interact with them throughout the day. Visual supports are created to be interacted with.

Include Student Voice:
Continuously check in with students on the future use, current use and engagement of visual supports. Ask students' questions like "what visual is the most meaningful for you?", "can you understand what the visual means?", "can you see the visual clearly?"

Make Visuals Accessible for All:
Avoid too much visual clutter in the classroom. Ensure visuals are accessible to all students, consider enlarging visual supports, increasing font sizes or providing individual visuals to students with additional needs.

Consider Placement:
Consider the positioning of visuals – ensure they are clearly visible for all students by placing them in prominent places at eye level.

Keep it Meaningful:
Keep visuals meaningful and functional for the class group. Choose a visual support that is based on the class group's needs, interests and learning experiences.

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References

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