

Visuals Cues for Organisation

What is organisation and visual cues?



Organization involves the ability to; plan ahead, pull together the required materials, sequentially perform a task, adhere to a task long enough to follow it through and complete the task in an appropriate time frame. Organization is typically a skill that (at least at some degree) needs to be specifically modeled, supported by sensible structures (such as diaries or visual charts, labelled storage containers) and reinforced by realistic routines (pack away one toy/task before commencing another).

Visual cues are anything that provides visual information. Specifically related to organisation, visual schedules and timers tell the child for how long they need to

perform a task and when they are going to have to do an activity. Schedules can be helpful in helping a child sequence steps involved in tasks as well as reduce anxiety about what is coming up. Timers allow us to pre-warn children or to limit time on desirable activities such as computers or iPads.

Why are visual cues for organisation important?

“Organisationally challenged children not only have trouble with remembering and being organized about the house, but show forgetfulness, poor follow through, procrastination, confusion and time wasting in other parts of their lives as well” (Le Messurier, 2007 p 63). These children also often lack the individual building blocks for higher order organization such as independent organization which can be due to a specific learning difficulty, developmental immaturity, the presence of pervasive diagnostic traits or simply inconsistent adult support to master the use of typical (age appropriate) organization strategies.

Many children have strengths in visual areas compared to other areas, particularly those with a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). For many children, a visual cue or a picture remains constant long after the word or sign has been completed. Research has suggested that a multi-sensory learning environment gives many children the best opportunity to reach their full potential, which is why it makes sense to support one sensory system (i.e. hearing) with another, sight.

What are the building blocks necessary to develop organisation skills?

- **Working memory:** the ability to temporarily retain and manipulate information involved in language comprehension, reasoning, and learning new information; and to update this information as change occurs.
- **Attention and concentration:** the ability to give continuous focus on a task.
- **Planning and sequencing:** the sequential multi-step task or activity performance to achieve a well-defined result.

How can you tell if there is a problem if my child has problems with organisation?

If a child has difficulties with organisation they might:

- Show inconsistent ability to find clothes or items, despite them being in the same place.
- Require assistance to pack/unpack school bag.
- Be unable to keep track of personal items.
- Have difficulties following rules of a game, especially when they keep changing.
- Show poor ability to organise materials for class activities.
- Dislike deviation from familiar routines.
- Display avoidance, reluctance or difficulty attempting unfamiliar tasks.
- Be slow to complete tasks and needing instructions repeated.
- Require explicit instructions.
- Find long term planning difficult.
- Have difficulty beginning a task.
- Be unable to solve the problem when confronted by a challenge.
- Be unable to hold the plan in working memory while executing it.
- Be unable to appropriately sequence tasks.
- Show poor self regulation of emotional responses to challenges or stimuli.

What other problems can occur when a child has organisation difficulties that might benefit from visual cues?

When a child has organisation difficulties that might benefit from visual cues, they might also have difficulties with:

- **Self care task performance** (i.e. age influenced - possibly toileting, dressing, eating)
- **Academic performance** (e.g. starting a task, working through a challenge, planning a project and carrying it through to completion)
- **Social skills** (social isolation is common)

- **Independence** in activities of daily living such as packing their bag for preschool or school
- **Behaviour** (rapid frustration and poor self esteem are common)

What can be done to improve the use of visuals for organisation?

- **Correct type of visual:** Visuals may include: real objects, photographs of the actual object, photographs of similar objects, drawings, computer generated symbols, (e.g. Boardmaker, Pictures for PECS symbols) and words. Some children will prefer or relate to each type differently. Trial and error will help determine which one your child will prefer.
- **Actual objects:** Generally younger children and those who have additional difficulties need visuals that most closely resemble an actual object. For example, these children are likely to respond better when you show them a puzzle rather than an electronic symbol of a puzzle.
- **Use speech:** Always use visuals with speech/words as they are designed to help your child understand spoken language, not to substitute it.
- **Consistent labelling:** It is recommended to print the name of the visual at the bottom of the card to ensure that everyone calls the object the same thing (is it a mug or a cup? a book or a reader?).
- **Accessibility:** Ensure visuals are easily accessible for the child. Keep them near where you are most likely to use them (on the fridge, in the toilet; near the front door).
- **Make them portable:** Put a few key symbols on your key ring (finish, toilet, car, home) for key words or for a sequence of what to do (e.g. sequence of how to unpack bag at school).
- **Allow processing time:** Allow the child time to process and point to the desired visual. It is a skill in itself as a parent or carer to be patient and wait! Often the children using these sorts of visuals, take longer to process information and thus to respond.
- **Persevere.** Your child may need many trials before they make the connection between the visual and the real object.
- **Reward your child** when they achieve success through the use of visuals.
- **Achievable expectations:** Start with small achievable tasks or routines and reward immediately until they have grasped the idea of what they

need to do to get a reward at which point you can extend the task and time delay for a reward.

Activities that can help improve organisation with the use of visuals include:

- **Visual schedules** enable a child to see and understand what is going to happen next. Schedules also help people to organise themselves and to plan ahead.
- **Timers** help with transitions as they tell the child how long and when they are going to have to do an activity. Timers allow us to pre-warn the child.
- **Small achievable parts:** Break tasks down into small achievable steps and use the visual schedule to guide through the process.
- **Academic templates:** Use a template for layout with space for headings, diagrams and written work. Similar to those used on slides within PowerPoint presentations. Use pre-drawn tables for adding in details during graphing or data collection.
- **Limit resources,** and only have materials necessary for the task at hand. Keep the working space as clear as possible of non-relevant materials.
- **Storage:** Store work in separate containers within the desk/tote tray or have a separate space specifically set aside for the child's belongings. Organise these into specific containers so that they do not need to search through their entire belongings to find an individual item.
- **Labels:** Use pictures stuck on the outside of the containers to identify what the inside items should contain. Store pencils and the like in a clear pencil case so that items can be easily found.

Why should you seek therapy to help teach organisation using visual cues?

- Organisation is evident in children's play, social interaction with their peers, personal management (e.g. self care tasks, bringing home all their belongings from school), and academic task management (e.g. homework, project planning and performance)

- It is a key ability required for a successful school transition.
- Helps develop and model executive functioning skills that are required for many higher level activities.

Left untreated, the lack of visual organisation can lead to:

- A child being unable to reach their full academic potential. In many cases organisation is the key to success. If a child fails an assignment because they were not organised enough to get it done and hand it in on time, they not giving themselves the best chance to achieve.
- Challenges with daily activities. As organisation is a skill that to some degree needs to be explicitly taught and modelled, it is important that they have access to strategies such as the use of visuals to allow them to be successful in daily activities.
- Avoidance and poor behaviour. Children with organization difficulties are often very aware of their challenges and quickly learn to subtly (or not) avoid them. This only reinforces any skill delays that are emerging from lack of practice.
- Poor self esteem and self perception as children find it difficult to differentiate between being bright and having difficulties with organization.

What type of therapy is recommended for visual organisation difficulties?

If your child has difficulties with visual organisation, it is recommended they consult an Occupational Therapist.

If there are multiple areas of concern (i.e. beyond just visual organisation) both Occupational Therapy and Speech Therapy may well be recommended to address the functional areas of concern. This is the benefit of choosing Kid Sense which is a multi-disciplinary service provider.

Contact us today to make an initial enquiry or book an assessment for your child
on 1800 KID SENSE (1800 543 736)

