

Using Visual Activity Schedules with children with autism

Stephanie Giles and Jennifer Stephenson

Statement of the Problem

Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) often become anxious or display problem behaviour when transitioning between activities or when they are unable to anticipate what will occur next. Children with ASD may also often have trouble understanding what they are supposed to do next if the information is presented verbally. They may be unable to understand what is expected of them and this may result in problem behaviour.

Proposed Solution/ Intervention

A visual activity schedule is a pictorial schedule (which can take the form of photographs, cartoons or line drawings) representing the activities the student must complete over the course of a day, or within a particular session (e.g. reading groups).

The aim of a visual activity schedule is to enable students to understand what is happening next, by providing a summary of the sequence of events, allowing them to predict what will happen next.

The theoretical rationale – how does it work?

Children with autism and other disabilities often respond better to information presented visually. Visual information is not transient and the schedule provides a permanent representation of events. It is also the case that students with ASD often become distressed or display problematic behaviour when transitioning between activities or when they are unsure what is to occur next.

Visual schedules are an attempt to combat problems associated with transitions and lack of predictability, by presenting the schedule in a visual manner. The rationale is that the students will be able to (or learn to) interpret the visual information and anticipate what is occurring next, making transitions easier for the students.

What does the research say? What is the evidence for its efficacy?

A number of experimental research studies have reported improvements in on-task behaviour and decreases in problem behaviour (e.g. tantrums)

when visual schedules were used with children with ASD.

These benefits have been demonstrated within special school settings, inclusive classrooms, residential programs and home environments. Similarly, the research has not solely focused on academic tasks. There have been experimental research studies that have shown the advantages of using visual activity schedules for daily living tasks as well as recreation and leisure tasks.

Some research has shown that students may learn to generalise the use of visual activity schedules to other environments and to new symbols or pictures.

Most of the studies in this area have been well-designed small-n studies rather than randomised control studies.

Conclusions

As the skills of children with autism spectrum disorders can vary greatly depending on the child, what works for one child or group of students may not necessarily be successful for others. However, the principles upon which visual activity schedules for use with children with ASD are based are well-validated.

While further studies (particularly a randomised control study) are needed, the evidence which already exists is adequate to allow conditional recommendation.

The MUSEC verdict
Worth a try

Key references may be found at:
http://www.musec.mq.edu.au/community_outreach/musec_briefings

Macquarie University Special Education Centre
Building X5A, Macquarie University NSW 2109
Ph: 9850 8691 Fax: 9850 8254

