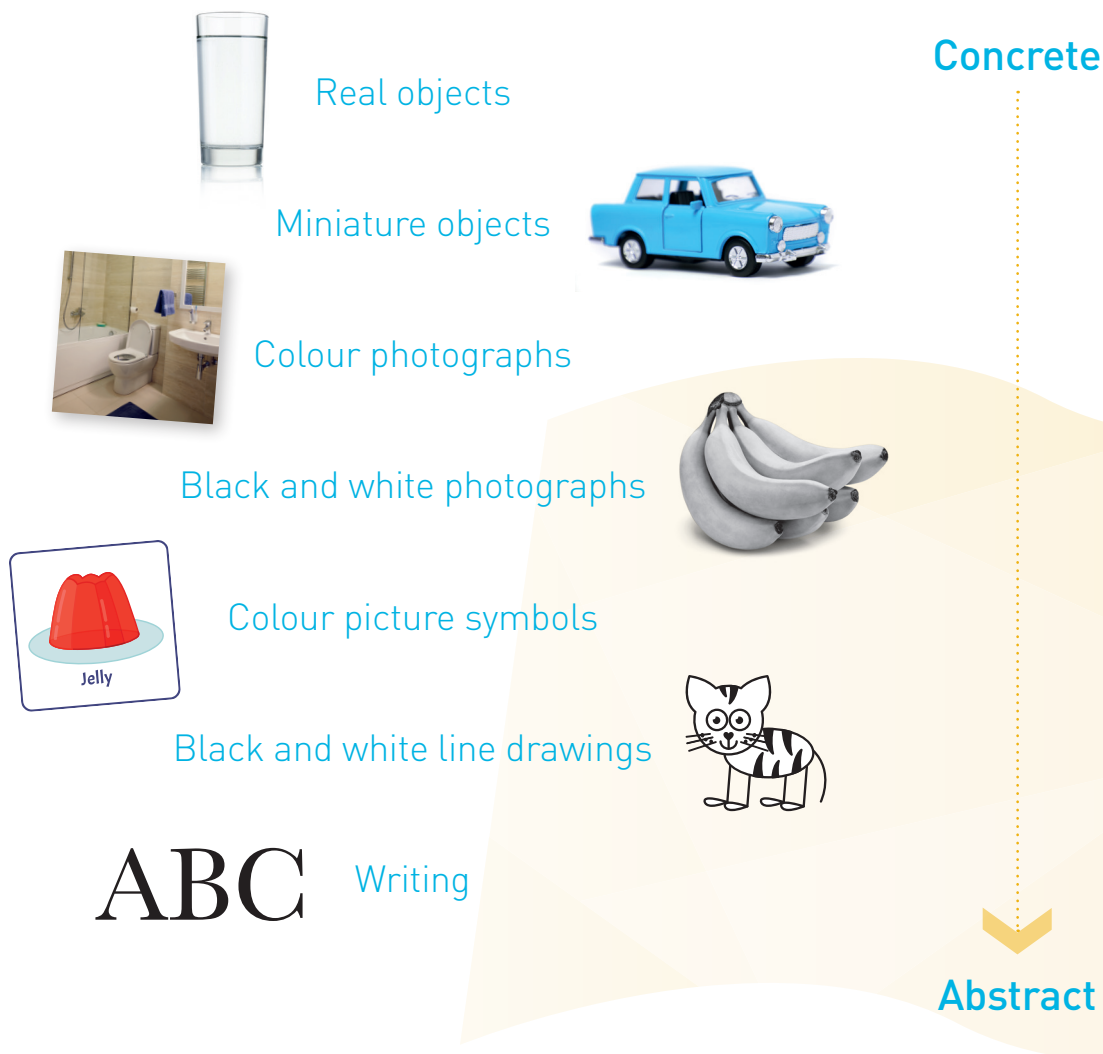CHILDREN'S SERVICES Information Sheet

VISUAL SUPPORTS

What are visual supports?

Children with Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN) often find it difficult to predict what will happen next, which makes them wary of change and means they prefer routine. It can be helpful for adults to set the routines using visuals. It is important to be aware of the 'Hierarchy of visual supports' so that you can identify the level that your child is at and use the appropriate visuals. A child may be exposed to more than one visual: they may be using their own objects of reference but the class may have a visual timetable for everyone.

Hierarchy of visual supports

Real objects

Concrete

Miniature objects

Colour photographs

Black and white photographs

Colour picture symbols

Jelly

Black and white line drawings

ABC   Writing

Abstract

Provide

Delivering **NHS** and **Local Authority Community Services**

Children's Speech & Language Therapy

15 Reasons to use visual supports

We all like to know what is going to happen across our day. Children with SLCN are no different.

1. As well as missing much of the verbal language used in the classroom environment, children with SLCN miss many of the social/environmental cues and non-verbal communication that helps us to understand what is happening. Not knowing what is going to happen can lead to anxiety which may result in challenging behaviours. Visual supports can help a child to understand expectations of the day ahead.

2. Many children with SLCN have complex difficulties with both expressive and receptive language and need visual supports to supplement verbal communication. Some children with SLCN who do not have these language difficulties may still find it challenging to understand language for a variety of reasons:

- Difficulties with regulating sensory needs, hence affecting attention and focus
- Longer processing times
- Are easily distressed/distracted, impacting on their ability to take in verbal information
- Literal understanding of language

3. Visual supports are permanent. Words are said and gone!

4. Visual supports promote independence in school work, reducing the need to ask adults for help. Visual representation enables children to see the progress that they are making and helps build a sense of success.

5. Schedules can help a child with SLCN to sequence their work. Time management and organisation is an area that many children with SLCN struggle with.

6. Visual supports can help focus children with poor attention.

7. Most children with SLCN are visual learners and visual supports capitalise on this strength.

8. Visual supports help to make sense of the world and provide much needed structure and predictability.

9. Visual supports can help to develop organisational skills. Involving the child in preparing their visual supports will give them some control over what they are going to do during the day.

10. Visual supports can promote flexibility for coping with new and upcoming events and transitions. Adults can bring the concept of 'change' into a child's life, using appropriate visual supports.

11 It is possible to build clear 'reward' times into the day using visual supports so that a child knows that the required tasks will be followed by more preferred activities. This enables a child to stay motivated.

12 Visual supports can help a child to be proactive in terms of managing their own behaviour, for example, recognising and signifying when they need a break.

13 Visual supports can support memory and recall. For example, helping a child to remember what they have done or what they need.

14 Pictures can often convey messages much quicker than spoken or written words. Just think about all the 'visuals' we have in everyday life, for example, traffic signs, logos.

15 Visual supports benefit all children within the classroom, school and home environment.

Objects of reference (real/miniature objects)

Within the 'Hierarchy of visual supports' the most concrete types of supports are real and miniature objects (representational).

When children cannot understand words, we can help them understand what is happening by showing them something that will help them link the word to the experience.

To teach children the link between an object with an experience, they need to have lots of opportunities to link that experience with the object.

Start with familiar situations, for example, bath time or mealtime. Show your child something they can clearly link to that event.

- Show the object before the event
- Show the object during the event
- Say the single word repeatedly alongside the object.

For example, prior to a bath time, show your child their towel and sa

'bath time'.

You can help your child prepare for outside experiences by showing them something they can link to the experience, for example, using a specific bag for nursery.

At school, objects may be linked to different lessons and activities and used to support transitions. You may want to 'guide' your child with the object or they may want to hold it.

Examples:

PE: Snack time:

Using photographs

Children often have difficulty imaging what is going to happen next and understanding changes in routines. Some children become anxious about events that are not part of familiar routines and will ask repeatedly what is going to happen. This can be supported through the use of photographs linked to activities, places, objects and familiar people.

- Prepare photographs of all the key activities throughout the day, both at home and within pre-school/school sessions.

- Prior to a change in activity, show your child the appropriate photograph and tell them, using a key word, what the next activity is eg as you show them a picture of the supermarket say "shop." Once you arrive at the supermarket again show them the photograph and say "shop".

- It is important that everyone working with your child also uses these photographs.

- Always support use of photographs with minimal language. For example, "X playschool" rather than "come on X, we're going to playschool".

- Once your child has connected a few photographs with what is about to happen next, use a simple first/then board or visual timetable showing the photographs of the next few activities. Place this somewhere your child can easily see it.

- Involve your child in the use of these photographs, taking them to the board, pointing to each one in turn saying. For example, "first shop" (pause) "then cars".

- To help your child understand that an activity has finished, involve them in taking the photograph off the board.

- Gradually this can be extended so the photographs can be used on a visual timetable, with activities happening during the day, morning and afternoon. Show your child the timetable each morning and throughout the day.

FIRST
Put toys away

THEN
Play on computer

FIRST
Listen
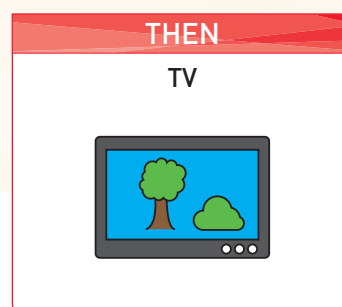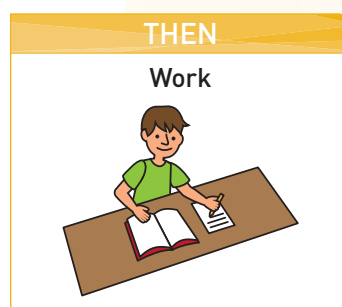
THEN
Work

THEN
TV

Using first/then

Once your child shows an understanding of using objects and photographs within their routine, you can move on to using them in a first/then box/grid.

Using objects:

Place objects of two preferred activities in a box or tray. Give your child the first/then box and let them feel the objects while giving simple verbal instructions for example, 'first bubbles', 'then Lego', touching each object in turn.

Increasing the expectation: Once your child understands the concept of an imposed schedule, place an object of a neutral or less preferred activity in the 'first' box and a highly preferred activity in the 'then' box (ie first snack – then bubbles). Then use the box in the same way.

Managing resistance: If your child does not follow the instruction, try not to repeat the instruction too much, simply redirect their attention to the first/then box.

Although your child may initially resist following the less preferred activity, it is important that the 'then' activity is not given until the 'first' activity has been completed. Start with low demand activities, such as completing two pieces of a puzzle, before moving on to a more preferred activity such as bubbles.

Using photographs/symbols:

See above. The same method applies but photographs or symbols are used instead.

First/then could be extended to include 'next' (first/next/then). Your child would then be expected to complete two less preferred activities before receiving the more preferred activity or item.

| FIRST	THEN
Reading	Tablet Time
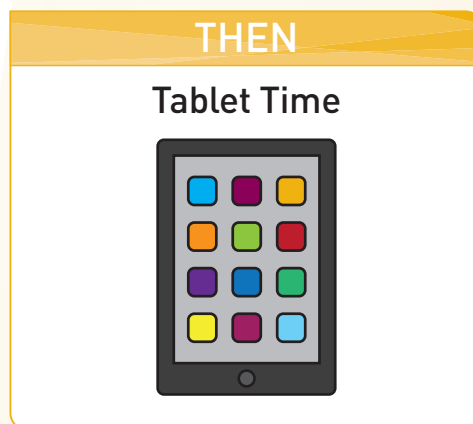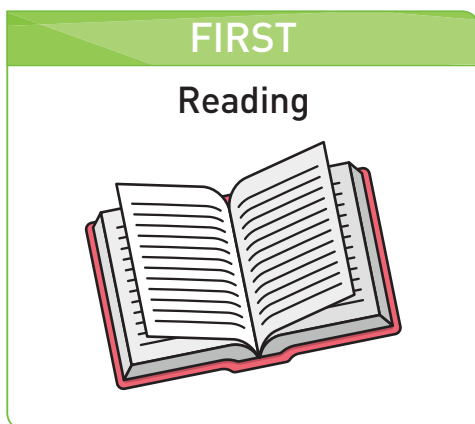
THEN

FIRST

Using visual timetables

Children with SLCN often find it difficult to predict what will happen next, which often makes them wary of change and means they prefer routine. It can be helpful for adults to set the routines so children do not put in their own anxiety driven or repetitive routines.

A visual timetable can reduce the anxiety around what will happen next and help a child focus on the current task. It also helps an adult show them a change to the usual routine and help them prepare for it.

Before you introduce a visual timetable:

📙 Children need to be familiar with pictures and understand their meaning (ie that they relate to an activity). Introduce visuals as early as possible to support their understanding eg a first/then board.

FIRST	THEN
Tidy Up	Outside
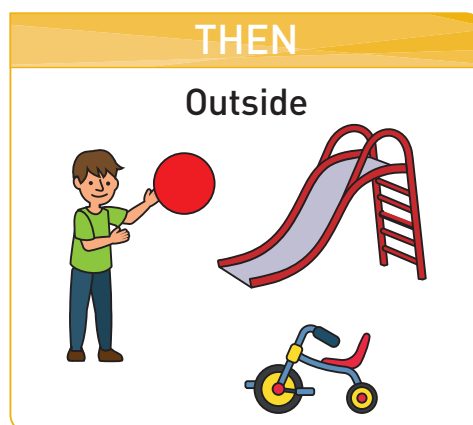
Introducing a visual timetable:

🚩 Your child should have their own visual timetable in a place where they can access it, eg within reach on the wall. It should be presented vertically however a visual schedule attached to a desk, for example to show the morning tasks before break, can be horizontal.

🚩 It may be helpful to break up the day initially, eg just put morning activities on rather than the whole day.

🚩 Talk your child through the visual timetable at the beginning of the day using clear, simple language eg first choosing, then assembly, then carpet, then choosing, then playtime.

🚩 Your child should be supported to remove the picture as the event has finished eg when moving from the carpet to choosing, you should help your child to remove the carpet picture by saying 'carpet finished, now choosing' and encourage them to put the finished picture in a 'finished' box or envelope.

🚩 The timetable should be used interactively (ie your child removing the pictures as the activities are completed) but you should remain in control. It is important that an adult sets the activities (although the child can help) and the visual timetable is not seen as a choose board.

🚩 Show your child any changes on their timetable so they are aware of them.

🚩 Make sure the visual timetable is used consistently – although they may appear not to need it, it can often relieve anxiety when your child is feeling less sure eg if there is a change of routine that day.

🚩 The visual timetable can be adapted as your child gets older and more able eg they may no longer require pictures but can rely on a written list or diary.

🚩 Visual timetables can also be used at home to set out the activities of the day – this is particularly useful when there is less structure such as during the holidays.

Getting ready for bed example:

bath

milk

pyjamas

story

bedtime
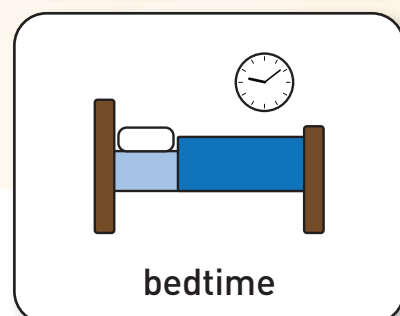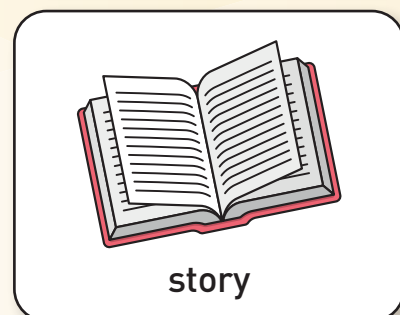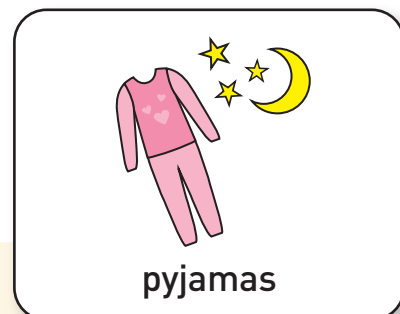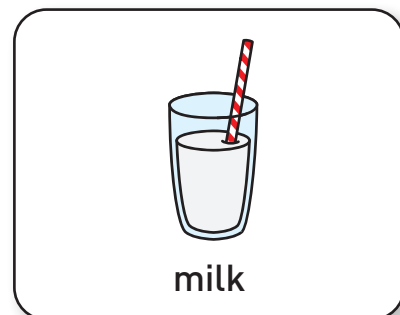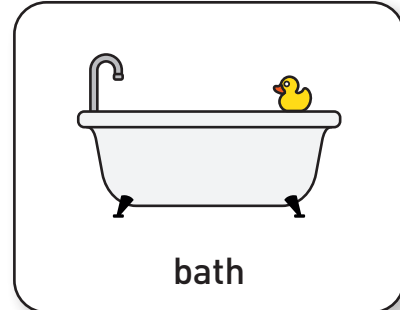
Using visual supports – choice boards

A choosing board can be used to provide an opportunity for a child to use an alternative means to communicate a choice from pictures or photos. This gives a child who is non-verbal or has limited verbal skills, is very passive or unable to use language to make things happen for them, a clear and visual way to communicate their needs without using words.

How to use a choosing board:

First:

Depending on your child's skills, you may need to teach them the link between real activities/objects and pictures by preparing photographs/symbols of all the key activities throughout the day, including favourite toys, activities, objects and people.

Initially, use photographs on their own whilst your child develops an understanding of the link between the real object/activity and the photograph. When an activity is about to begin, show your child the appropriate photo and tell them, using a key word, what the next activity is. For example, as you show them a picture of the car say their name and "car." Once out in the car, show the photo again and say "car".

Can your child choose between two objects?

Once your child is showing an awareness of the link between photos and real objects, present just a choice of two items at first. Your child may need help to make an effective choice from two items. If you feel they cannot choose between two highly motivating items, offer a choice of something very motivating and something they are not particularly interested in or able to play with, such as bubbles and a sock.

Then:

Show your child the choosing board and indicate the opportunity for choice by saying 'choosing'. When you are showing the pictures, name the photos eg 'painting or puzzle?'

When your child reaches for a picture, support them to remove it from the board and pass it to you. Then you can clearly model the single word eg 'bubbles' and quickly start the activity. You may need to consult your therapist for any specific steps for your child.

Using a calendar

Calendars are an easy, visual way to show children how long until an event and to help them breakdown and understand time concepts.

- A calendar is especially useful when the routine changes eg half term, holidays etc. It can show your child how long until the holiday or event, and how long it will last.
- You may want to write events on the days, or just leave it blank if you just want to show what days are school/not school etc. You could use pictures to show where your child will be going eg on a Saturday they might be going out somewhere rather just staying at home all day.
- Get your child involved in choosing colours to represent home, school or away.
- They may like to cross off the days as they happen.
- You could split the day into morning and afternoon.

A blank calendar template for Word can be easily downloaded and edited eg by colouring in the different days using the 'shading' button on the table option.
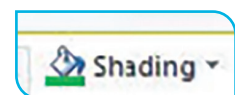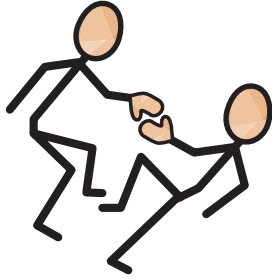
You can download free calendar templates from:
http://www.wincalendar.com/word-calendar-templates.htm

Sample Calendar

~ January 2018 ~

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
1	2	3	4	5	6	
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

Yellow = School day
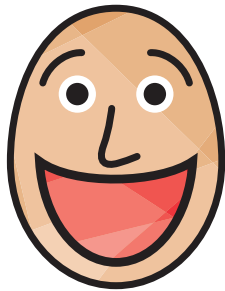**Green = At home/not at school**
Blue = On holiday/away from home

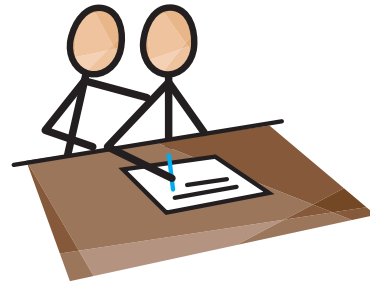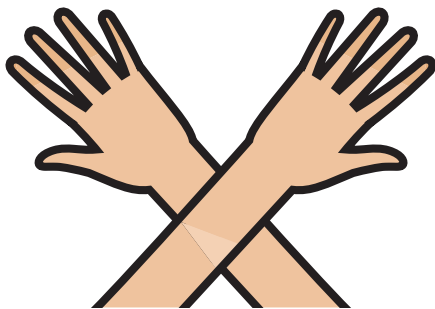Please see below some example symbols you that may be useful.

help

oops

surprise

help

finished

break