Structured Learning

A practical handbook for educators

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01

Introduction

Goal of this Chapter: To introduce Structured Learning as the core educational framework designed for the unique learning style of individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

What is Structured Learning

Structured Learning, or Structured TEACCHing, is the core educational framework of the TEACCH Program (Treatment and Education of Autistic and Communication-related Handicapped Children). This approach is specifically designed to accommodate the unique learning style of individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

Its main purpose is to create an organized, predictable, and visually clear environment that reduces anxiety, enhances understanding, and promotes independence by leveraging the common strength of visual information processing in autistic individuals.

Benefits of Structured Learning

Research studies have shown the TEACCH method is effective; studies state that this method impact autistic children's adaptive behaviors, plus social reciprocity, including the parents' stress levels and parent-child interactions. Similar research has shown this method is effective in reducing self-injurious behaviors

An added benefit to the TEACCH method is that, when parents are trained and can apply this method of teaching at home, and thereafter the child's behavior becomes more adaptive in their everyday routine, parental stress decreases. The role of parents in applying this method at home not only increases the efficacy of this methodology, but also contributes to the child's independence and improved integration socially.

Structured Learning is highly effective because it directly addresses common challenges faced by individuals with autism, leading to:

- **Increased Independence:** The visual clarity reduces the need for adult cues or prompts.
- **Reduced Anxiety:** Predictability and clear expectations minimize the fear of the unknown.
- **Enhanced Communication:** Visual supports supplement verbal language, which can be challenging to process.
- **Improved Task Completion:** Incorporating routines increases familiarity. Breaking down tasks into visually guided steps makes them less overwhelming and increases success.

The TEACCH Method

The TEACCH method (Treatment and Education of Autistic and Communication related Handicapped Children) is a clinical and educational framework specifically engineered to support students on the autism spectrum. Developed in the 1960s by Dr. Eric Schopler and Dr. Robert Reichler at the University of North Carolina, it is often referred to in pedagogical circles as Structured Teaching.

Unlike general education models, TEACCH is built upon the "Culture of Autism." It acknowledges the unique neurological profiles of autistic learners—specifically their strengths in visual processing and their need for predictability.

TEACCH methodology focuses on several key instructional pillars:

- **Physical Organization:** Clearly defining specific areas for specific activities (e.g., a dedicated station for independent work vs. a dedicated area for play) to reduce sensory overwhelm.
- **Visual Schedules:** Using icons, photos, or words to communicate the sequence of events, helping students

answer the vital questions: What am I doing? How long will it last? What comes next?

- **Work Systems:** Providing a systematic way for students to complete tasks independently by clarifying the "where, how much, and when" of classroom expectations.

Benefits of the TEACCH Approach

- Individualization: The intervention is not "one size fits all." It allows educators to adapt the environment and communication tools based on each student's specific perceptual needs and skill level.
- Fostering Independence: By clarifying the environment through visual aids, the method reduces a student's reliance on constant verbal prompting from staff.
- Integration: The framework is flexible enough to be implemented alongside other therapeutic approaches or specialized curricula.

The Educator-Parent Partnership

A hallmark of the TEACCH method is its recognition of parents as co-therapists. In a handbook context, this means educators should not only focus on classroom implementation but also on empowering families. The method provides a bridge between school and home, teaching parents how to assess their child's needs and implement structured, individualized support in a domestic setting.

02

Components of Structured Learning

Goal of this Chapter: To clearly define what constitutes Structured Learning and distinguish it from general educational practices.

What is <u>not</u> Structured Learning:

Using the same visual schedule for everyone	Using pictures as visual supports	Following routines

What is Structured Learning:

Designing the classroom layout	Creating meaningful boundaries	Using individualized visual schedules and work systems consistently
Creating predictability	Structuring and re-structuring activities	Addressing difficult behavior on the time

The Five Components of Structured Learning

Physical Organization

Physical organization refers to the arrangement of the physical space to create clear, visually defined areas for different activities.

Goal of organizing the environment is to help the individual understand where an activity takes place, what is expected to happen there and minimize distractions.

Examples: Using furniture, dividers, or clear boundaries (like tape on the floor) to designate specific zones for independent work, one-to-one teaching, group instruction, leisure, and breaks.

Individualized Visual Schedules

Schedules are visual tools that provide a clear and sequential overview of the day's activities.

Goal: To provide predictability and reduce anxiety about what will happen next, especially during transitions.

Forms: Visual schedules can be presented using words, pictures, photos, or objects, and are individualized to the person's comprehension level (e.g., a "first-then" board for new learners or a written checklist for more competent students).

Work (Activity) Systems

A work system is an organizational tool placed at the individual's workstation that clearly communicates the "what, how much, and what's next" of a task.

Goal: To promote independent work without constant verbal prompting.

Answers Four Questions:

- What am I supposed to do?

- How much work is there? (e.g., a pile of two tasks, 5 worksheets, number of picture cards on the schedule)
- How do I know when I am finished? (e.g., all tasks are moved to a "Finished" tray, bag, drawer)
- What comes next when I am done?

Visual Structure of materials/ tasks

This involves presenting the materials and tasks in a way that provides visual clarity.

Goal: To help the individual focus on the relevant information and understand how to complete the task.

Examples: Color-coding materials, providing clear boundaries for where items go, breaking down complex tasks into manageable, sequential steps, or using stencils/ jigs to guide placement in a vocational task.

Routine and Predictability

While not always listed as a distinct fifth element, the consistent use of the other four components establishes a stable, predictable routine.

Goal: The consistency of the structure itself lowers stress and frees up cognitive energy that might otherwise be spent figuring out the environment. It teaches the person *how* to learn.

Key Takeaway: *Success is not measured by how many materials you laminate, but by how much your presence as a teacher becomes unnecessary for the student to succeed.*

03

Assessment

Goal of this Chapter: To guide educators in conducting informal assessments to construct a comprehensive Learner Profile.

Understanding the Student: Assessment and Learning Profiles

Before implementing visual schedules or work systems, the educator must answer a fundamental question: *"Who is this student and how does perceive the world?"* While a medical diagnosis provides a label (Autism Spectrum Disorder), it does not provide an educational roadmap. For Structured Teaching, assessment is not about generating a score; it is about uncovering the Learning Style of the individual. This process shifts the focus from "what the student cannot do" (deficits) to "how the student learns best" (strengths and emerging skills). Standardized tests often fail to capture the true potential of autistic students due to their heavy reliance on verbal instructions and social engagement. Informal Assessment allows the teacher to observe the student in a naturalistic setting to determine understanding and skills.

What are we assessing?

Key areas include:

- Behavior: Triggers and functions of behaviors.
- Learning Style: Visual vs. Auditory processing, need for implicit learning, executive function.
- Communication: Expressive and Receptive language levels.
- Social cognition: Interaction with objects/ people.

Assessing Behavior

When a student exhibits challenging behavior (aggression, self-injury, disruption), it is almost always a form of communication.

The more you know about a person the more you understand the behavior he exhibits. To understand the behavior we must take a deeper look at the context.

Common behavior problems

- Sensory seeking or sensory response behavior
- Eloping & Task avoidance
- Task initiation
- Limited on-task behavior
- Poor understanding of social rules

The Informal behavior assessment

An informal assessment leads to individualization and shows the emerging skills (what the learner is ready to learn), the developmental appropriate skills he needs to obtain, the specific short-term goals to set.

Steps for conducting an informal behavior assessment:

Step 1: Define the Behavior

Be specific and define the behavior in concrete terms. Instead of "he exhibited inappropriate behavior," observe and take notes on exactly what he did ("he threw the math worksheet on the floor"). Then describe the expected behavior.

Step 2: Identify Setting Events (The Context)

Look for triggers that happened before the immediate situation.

Biological: Is the student hungry, tired, or in pain?

Environmental: Is it too loud? Too bright? (Sensory Overload).

Routine: Was there an unexpected change in the schedule?

Executive function: He doesn’t know what to do?

Step 3: Identify the Trigger

- What happened immediately before the behavior?
- Did you ask them to work? (Demand)
- Did you take away a toy? (Denial)
- Did you leave them alone? (Lack of attention)

Step 4: Determine the Function (The "Why")

Generate a hypothesis about the function of the behavior:

Need implicit learning: Difficulty understanding things automatically like choosing the right materials.

Executive function: Difficulty with time and organization.

To get something: Attention, a tangible item, or sensory stimulation.

To escape/ avoid: A difficult task, a social interaction, or a sensory environment.

Example: If the student tears up the worksheet and the teacher sends him to time-out (removing the work), the function was likely escaping the work, and the teacher inadvertently reinforced it.

Step 5: Design and implement an intervention to address the behavior

Structure the environment to guide or redirect the person towards the expected behavior.

Step 6: Create a plan for when the behavior occurs

Investigating the learning style

Using a Learning Styles Checklist, the educator systematically reviews how the student processes information. This is critical for designing the Work System later.

Key Dimensions to Evaluate:

The following list helps the educator identify the student's learning style guide to decide if the student needs more visual support, a structured work system, or sensory accommodations:

1. Attention & Focus Style

Sticky Attention: The student focuses intensely on details or specific objects and has difficulty transitioning to another activity. Students who cannot shift attention need transition objects or high-intensity visual cues to move between activities.

Distractible Attention: Attention shifts quickly from one stimulus to another; the student has difficulty completing tasks.

Focus on Detail: Notices minute features (e.g., lint on the carpet) instead of the whole picture.

2. Sensory & Processing Profile

Visual Learner: Prefers looking at books/photos, doing puzzles, sorting/lining up objects, and noticing visual details.

Auditory Learner: Likes music, hums, covers ears in response to sounds, repeats words (echolalia). If auditory processing is weak (as is common in ASD), is likely that your verbal instructions ("Sit down, open your book") are not understood fully. Therefore, the assessment confirms the need for visual supports.

Tactile/Kinesthetic Seeking: Puts objects in mouth, smells objects, walks on tiptoes, spins objects.

3. Organization & Understanding

Organizational Skills: Understands when something is finished (puts materials back), places objects in containers, follows the "left-to-right" flow. When given a pile of materials, does the student organize them (left-to-right)? Does he looks at them not doing

anything? Does he put them mixed all together? Does the student know when a task is done? Do they stop, look for reinforcement, or continue repetitively? This determines if they need a "Finished" box or a specific visual signal to move forward.

Implication: A chaotic approach indicates a need for containers and jigs (structured tasks) rather than loose materials.

Generalization: Has difficulty applying knowledge in a new environment or with new materials.

4. Communication & Social Interaction

Expressive Communication: Pulls the adult's hand to request something (instrumental use), uses gestures or echolalia.

Social Interaction: Prefers to play alone, resists physical contact, or does not respond to their name.

Assessing Communication Needs

Communication is often the root cause of behavioral challenges. Assessment must distinguish between forms (how they communicate) and functions (why they communicate – what's the purpose).

The Communication Assessment Hierarchy:

You must identify where the student falls on the continuum:

Pre-Intentional: The student cries or reaches without directing it to a person. The adult interprets the meaning.

Intentional Non-Symbolic: The student pulls the teacher's hand toward a desired object (gestural).

Symbolic: The student uses photos, icons, words, or sentences.

Check the gap between Receptive Language (what they understand) and Expressive Language (what they say).Many

autistic students have high expressive vocabulary (e.g., reciting movie scripts) but very low receptive understanding. If you assess based only on what they say, you may overestimate their ability to follow instructions, leading to failure.

Assembling the Individualized Profile

Once assessment on behavior, communication and learning style is complete, summarize the findings into a Learner Profile.

Sample Profile Summary:

Visual Learner: Needs photos, not line drawings.

Low Receptive Language: "First-Then" board required; limit verbal prompts.

Rigid with Transitions: Needs a "Transition Object" to move to the next area.

Sensory: Avoids glue (tactile defensive); uses Velcro instead.

Behavioral Function: Throws objects to escape difficult tasks. Solution: Break tasks into smaller steps (Structured Work System).

Tracking Student Progress

Teachers feel the most "challenged" by the design of physical layouts and work systems. To move beyond the "Materials Trap"—where 66.7% focus only on preparation time—we must use assessment to guide our design.

The Portfolio: Maintain a record of completed tasks to track the student's transition from "Guided" to "Independent" work.

Measuring Autonomy: Autonomy in Structured Teaching is defined by the correct completion of assigned tasks without prompts.

Refining the Schedule: Based on data, determine if the student is ready to move from "Hourly" schedule checks to checking "A few times during the day".

Conclusion

Assessment in Structured Teaching is an ongoing cycle, not a one-time event. As the student grows and skills emerge, the structure should be adjusted. By stopping reacting to behaviors and start designing an environment that prevents them, paving the way for independence.

Rubric 1: The "Visual Organization" Assessment

Purpose: To determine the appropriate level for the Visual Schedule and the structure of the Work System.

Skill Area	Level 1: High Support Needs	Level 2: Emerging Skills	Level 3: Independent	Strategy Implication
Object Representation	Can only match identical objects (e.g., cup to cup). Cannot associate a photo with an object.	Can match a photograph to a real object.	Can match line drawings, icons, or words to objects/actions.	**Level 1:** Use Object Schedule. **Level 2:** Use Photo Schedule. **Level 3:** Use Icon/Word Schedule.
Sequencing & Organization	Approaches materials chaotically. Does not follow Left-to-Right flow even with prompts.	Follows Left-to-Right flow if containers are arranged clearly, but may skip steps.	Automatically organizes materials Left-to-Right and Top-to-Bottom.	**Level 1:** Use "Jigs" and containment. **Level 2:** Use numbered baskets. **Level 3:** Use written checklists.
Concept of "Finished"	Does not stop when task is done; continues repetitively or looks to adult for a cue.	Stops when materials are gone but needs a prompt to put it away.	Independently puts work in the "Finished" basket/area upon completion.	**Level 1/2:** Needs a high-visibility "Finished" box or distinct visual signal.
Attention Style	**"Sticky Attention":** Fixates on one detail (e.g., spinning a wheel) and resists transition.	**Distractible:** Moves quickly between stimuli; difficulty sustaining focus.	**Focused:** Can shift attention from schedule to task and back.	**Sticky:** Use "Transition Objects." **Distractible:** Use blinders/dividers to reduce stimuli.

Rubric 2: The "Communication & Social Connection" Profile

Purpose: To identify the gap between expressive and receptive language and determine social supports.

Assessment Criteria	Emergent (Pre-Symbolic)	Transitional (Concrete)	Functional (Symbolic)	Strategy Implication
Communicative Intent	**Pre-Intentional:** Cries or reaches without directing it to a specific person.	**Intentional Non-Symbolic:** Pulls adult's hand toward desired item; uses gestures.	**Symbolic:** Uses words, pictures (PECS), or signs to request specific items.	**Emergent:** Interpret signals and label them. **Transitional:** Teach "giving" a picture to request.
Receptive vs. Expressive Gap	Understands less than they can say (e.g., echoes complex scripts but doesn't follow simple commands).	Understands single words or routine phrases in context.	Understands complex instructions and abstract concepts.	**If Gap is High:** Simplify verbal instructions; rely heavily on visual cues regardless of speech ability.
Social Orientation (Play)	**Isolate/Solitary:** Plays alone; treats others as objects or barriers.	**Parallel Play:** Plays near others with similar materials but does not interact.	**Interactive/Cooperative:** Shares materials; takes turns; engages in back-and-forth play.	**Isolate:** Use "Shared Interests" in parallel. **Parallel:** Structure turns using a "My Turn/Your Turn" card.
Understanding Social Rules	Unaware of social norms (e.g., personal space).	Tries to follow rules but misses non-verbal cues (facial expressions)	Understands rules but may be rigid; needs logic/reasoning explained.	**All Levels:** Use Social Stories to explain rules explicitly.

Rubric 3: The "Behavior & Regulation" Analysis

Purpose: To identify the "underlying deficits" causing behaviors and design the physical/sensory environment.

Behavioral Dimension	Red Zone (High Support)	Yellow Zone (Moderate Support)	Green Zone (Self-Regulated)	Prevention Strategy
Sensory Threshold	**Hypersensitive:** Reacts intensely to normal sounds/lights (covers ears, screams).	**Seeking:** Seeks intense input (jumping, crashing, loud noises).	**Regulated:** Can filter out background sensory input.	**Hyper:** Create a "Quiet Corner"; remove wall decorations. **Seeking:** Schedule "Heavy Work" breaks.
Response to Change	Meltdown or aggression upon *any* deviation from routine.	Anxiety/Whining during changes, but manageable with warnings.	Tolerates changes if given a visual cue (e.g., "Change" card).	**Red:** Keep routine rigid; use "Transition Object." **Yellow:** Use a "Change" card on the schedule.
Function of Behavior	**Escape/Avoid:** Behaviors occur primarily when a demand is placed (e.g., "Work time").	**Obtain/Access:** Behaviors occur when denied an item or attention.	**Communication:** Uses behavior to signal frustration or need for help.	**Escape:** Reduce task difficulty; use "First-Then." **Obtain:** Teach a functional replacement skill (e.g., handing a card to ask).
Coping Skills	No independent coping skills; requires physical containment or removal.	Can use a "Break" card if prompted by an adult.	Independently requests a break or uses a fidget tool.	**Goal:** Teach the use of a "Break Card" as a replacement for acting out.

04

Physical Structure

Goal of this Chapter: To demonstrate how the physical layout of a classroom can either create obstacles or generate learning opportunities.

The Impact of Environmental Structure on Learning and Behavior

Have you ever considered the impact of classroom layout on behavior and learning? All too often, the room itself, instead of creating learning opportunities, generates further obstacles. Therefore, your first step should be to modify the environment, minimizing anything you believe might trigger a reaction or challenging behavior. The primary goal within the classroom is for students to know exactly what they will be engaging with before they even sit in their chairs.

The objective is predictability: doing the same things, in the same place, at the same time. Knowing exactly what to do, where, and when acts as a preventive measure against challenging behavior. When we know what to expect, we are better prepared; the truth is, no one likes sudden changes. Identify the behaviors that disrupt the educational process and find a structural solution for them.

It is crucial to teach appropriate behaviors within a structured framework where you are able to manage the reaction. You know what will happen, when it will happen, why it happens, and—most of the time—how it will unfold and how you can control it. In this way, you will familiarize the student with new, more functional behaviors and help them generalize these skills in environments outside the classroom.

Physical Structure – Organizing the Classroom for Success

Why Physical Structure is the First Step

For individuals with autism, the environment can often perceived as a chaotic set of stimuli. Physical structure is the answer to

student's anxiety, as it explains where things happen without them needing to ask. Every inch of the classroom must have a clear meaning.

The 4 "Musts" of Spatial Organization:

1. Visual Boundaries: Use color-coding, labels, floor tape, plastic boards or rugs to define areas.
2. Reduction of Distractions: Position work desks facing walls.
3. Clear Activity Zones: Separate areas for 1-on-1 teaching, group work, calming corner..
4. The Transition Station: A central spot where the student's visual schedule is located.

Creating work stations

A student should know what he is expected to do and where he is expected to do it. Different areas of learning mean different way of working, different expectations and different skill set. In a school setting the following areas should be created and indicated on the student's visual schedule:

Independent work area: where the student is expected to follow a work system independently of a one-to-one instruction lesson.

One-to-one teaching area: where the students sits with the teacher to get instructions and learn a new skill.

Shared activity area: where the student sits with other classmates and engages on parallel play or taking turns play.

Recess area: where the student can take some time off, eat, play with others or enjoy a preferred activity (alone or in company).

05

Visual supports:
Cues, reminders & schedules

Goal of this Chapter: To explain how modifying the environment to capitalize on visual strengths maximizes learning and independence.

Meeting our students' needs

Modifying the environment to meet our students' needs will maximize their learning and thereafter their independence level. The typical classroom environment relies on verbalization as the primary mode of communication. Communication can be more efficient when capitalizing on student's visual strengths.

Types of visual supports

Type of Visuals can take a range of forms such as schedules, first-then boards, single pictures, scripts and social information.

Visual supports can also be used on a larger scale to organize the classroom. For example, a quiet reading corner or group seating areas can be shown using different flooring, mats or by putting tape on the floor. Materials can be arranged visually and labelled so that students can access them easily. Visuals can be individualized such as using a small mat to sit on in class. The student can then take the mat to assembly to remind them to stay seated and keep their body within the boundary of the mat.

Choose the type of visual support. This could be:

- a single picture to show the next activity
- a picture showing the materials the student needs to collect for an activity, e.g. show pictures of scissors, glue, pencil and worksheet that the student needs to collect
- a series of pictures showing the steps in an activity, e.g. organise a sequence of pictures to show 'First cut out, then glue pictures onto the worksheet, then label the pictures' information about people.

- a social narrative that helps a student understanding a situation (see the social narratives factsheet).

Creating visual supports

Visuals can be used to support any situation where a student would benefit from more information or more concrete information about a task, situation or activity.

The symbols you use should be based on what the student understands. Most of the time photos are easier to understand than pictures, e.g. a photo of the assembly hall will be more recognizable than a generic picture of a school hall.

It is often best to create a blank template that you can put pictures on and take them off as needed. Print pictures or photos separately; cut out and laminate as needed. Attach pictures to the visual support template using Velcro or similar.

Show the visual to the student before the task. Students need to learn to use visual supports and will often benefit from plenty of time to look at the visual and modelling how to use them.

To become meaningful, use a carry and match object or picture. For example, the student matches the toothbrush picture on the schedule with the actual object in the bathroom. This helps him understand that the toothbrush picture means he has to brush his teeth. This strategy can be faded once the individual moves to where the picture/ object suggests independently. Then he can mark off or move the picture and put it in a socket/envelope once it's done.

Place the visual where the student can see it easily. This could be on the white board, the student's desk or on a wall. Make sure the visual is accessible to the student/s who need it.

Monitor the student and the use of the visual support. If it does not seem to be helping, try the following: change the type of symbols used to make sure the student understands, make the format simpler, with fewer pictures or steps, ensure you are using simple language when using the visual, make sure that the student has enough time to look at the visual to understand it.

Visual supports can be made using specialised software, photos taken by the teacher, or using images from photo libraries on the internet. They can also be hand drawn or simple word documents, depending on the needs of the student. They need to clearly represent the important information. Words can be added as a prompt to teachers and other adults to use simple, consistent language when using the visual support.

In the TEACCH method, visual schedules and visual reminders (often-referred to as visual cues or instructions) serve two distinct but complementary functions within Structured Teaching.

Visual Schedule: The "Where" and "When"

The visual schedule is the macro-level tool. Its primary purpose is to provide an overview of the day or a specific period to reduce anxiety and increase predictability.

- Function: It tells the student what activities will happen, in what order, and where they need to go.
- Structure: Usually a sequential list (top-to-bottom or left-to-right) using objects, photos, icons, or words.
- Goal: To help the student transition independently between different areas of the classroom (e.g., from the "Work Station" to the "Recess Area").

- **Example**: A strip on the wall showing: *Arrival → Circle Time → Individual Work → Break → Lunch.*

Visual Reminder/ Cue: The "How"

A visual reminder or visual instruction is a micro-level tool. It is used once the student has arrived at a specific activity.

- **Function**: It clarifies **how** to complete a specific task or what the expectations are for a specific behavior.
- **Structure**: These can be labels, task analysis (step-by-step instructions), or Choice Boards.
- **Goal**: To promote independence *within* an activity so the student does not have to wait for a teacher to tell them the next step.
- **Example**: A "Visual Instruction" inside a workstation showing the 3 steps to assemble a folder, or a "Visual Reminder" on a desk that says "Quiet Feet" or "Raise Hand."

Key Differences at a Glance

Feature	Visual Schedule	Visual Reminder / Cue
Primary Question	"What am I doing next?"	"How do I do this right now?"
Scope	Global (The whole day/session)	Specific (A single task or behavior)
Location	Transition area or portable binder	Directly at the point of action (desk, bin, door)
Outcome	Smooth transitions between places	Mastery and independence within a task

Why use both?

If you only have a **schedule**, the student might get to the desk but then sit idle because they don't know how to start the work. If you only have **reminders**, the student may work well but become highly

anxious or "stuck" because they don't know when the work will end or what happens next. Together, they create a complete "roadmap" for the student's day.

The Function of the Visual Schedule

A visual schedule is the tool that transforms abstract time into concrete visual information. It helps the student transition between activities with less anxiety by answering: "What comes next?". A visual schedule is an arrangement of pictures or symbols that show the particular order that a sequence of tasks is performed (Banda et al., 2009; Fowkes, 2022).

Visual schedules do not consist strictly of icons. A visual schedule does not necessarily have to include icons. It can be composed of icons, it may include them, or it could consist of physical objects representing the student's activities. It might simply be a chronological list of the day's lessons, color-coded for clarity, or even just a sequence of numbers. While all students benefit from having a schedule, students on the autism spectrum require a higher degree of organization and simplification. Knowing the student and how much information they need guides us on how to create a visual schedule, a mini schedule or a work system and it is critical when we create visual directions.

Visual schedules help to familiarize students with the classroom, they do this by showing an expected order of activities using written language, pictures, and/or symbols (Macdonald et al., 2018). There are between-activity schedules and within-activity schedules (Curtin & Long, 2021). Between activity schedules act as a visual sequence of events moving students from one task to another and helping with transitions, within-activity schedules act more as a visual task

sequence of the steps required to complete a single task (Curtin & Long, 2021).

A schedule can incorporate a cue to help students remember what is happening that day, help them be ready for the activities and changes happening in the day which can help reduce anxiety that the students might feel (Cramer et al., 2011). In addition to helping students follow a routine, visual schedules have been shown to be an effective antecedent strategy in reducing problematic behaviors (Macdonald et al., 2018, King, 2015).

Visual schedules can be helpful in removing the dependence students have on adults to give assurance and support during planned and unplanned changes in their daily schedule (Banda et al., 2009).

Activity schedules can also help students “develop a positive routine of looking for information and thus increase flexibility and the ability to cope with life’s ups and downs in the future” (Davies, 2008, p.18).

While visual schedules fill the function of providing a pattern for the activities that are to be completed, they can also have multiple advantages such as relieving the stress of transitions, independent completion of tasks, following routines, and increasing executive function abilities (Fowkes, 2022). Using visual schedules can help decrease maladaptive or undesired behaviors during transition periods (Connelly, 2017).

When teaching a routine, students have more success if the steps of the routine are shown in a practical and applicable sequence with a distinctive beginning and end (Schneider & Goldstein, 2010).

There are five main considerations for creating and using a visual schedule:

- How long the schedule is
- How students interact with the schedule
- Where the schedule is presented (stable or transferred)
- How students initiate the routine of following the schedule
- How the schedule is presented

Types of visual schedules according to the level of representation

- Object Level: Using real items (e.g., a spoon for lunch).
- Photograph Level: Realistic photos of the classroom.
- Picture Level: Abstract symbols (e.g., PECS icons).
- Word Level: Written lists for students who can read.

Object Schedules

These are most appropriate for individuals who have fewer language skills. They can be used for very young children up to adults. The simplest way to use an object schedule is to hand an object to the student just before he is about to move to the next activity. The individual then takes the object and uses it in the next activity. Start by making a list of which objects you are going to use to represent each activity your child does.

Picture or Photograph Schedules

If the student attends to photos or pictures in books or magazines, and can consistently match pictures or photos, they may be ready for a picture-based schedule. Some people respond better to actual photographs of the activity, whereas other may prefer computerized depictions.

Written Schedules

Written schedules are used for students who are fluent readers. If the student is able to recognize words, you can start with adding words to his or her picture schedule. Some individuals respond well to schedules that are located on an electronic device.

Using a visual schedule

Decide on the length of the schedule. Beginning learners start with being handed an object or photograph representing the next activity. Once they understand this process, you can begin to introduce a “First-then” schedule that shows a sequence of two activities. Some individuals benefit from always using a First-then schedule, while others may be able handle more information, incorporating three, four, or a whole day’s worth of activities. Observe your child and notice the number of items he or she can handle at one time.

Decide how you will track progress using the schedule. There are a number of different ways to mark off activities on a schedule. Marking off the activity helps the person know where they are and see that they are making progress through the schedule. For younger children, it is often helpful to start by having the child remove the item from his or her schedule as an activity is completed so that there is a clear representation that the activity is finished. Sometimes the removed item is put in a “finished” area near their schedule, such as a basket or pocket at the bottom of the schedule. There are other variations such as turning over each picture of a picture schedule when the activity is complete or moving it from the “to do” side (left side) of the page to the “finished” side (right side) of the page. For written schedules, students can cross a line though activities as they have finished them or put a check in a checkbox.

Some individuals benefit from carrying the object or picture to the location they are moving to, and matching it with Velcro to a similar object or picture. This is helpful for children who do not transition independently because they get distracted or forget where their schedule told them to go.

Decide on the cue you are going to use to get the person to check their schedule. The simplest cue is to place the object representing the next activity into the person's hand. In this case, the schedule is brought to the individual. When a child is able to travel independently to their schedule to check it, one of the best methods to use it to give them a visual cue to "*check schedule*." Using a visual cue removes language demands that may not be processed well, especially if the person is highly anxious. A visual cue also helps a person who may be distracted and who may have forgotten they were supposed to check their schedule. Examples of visual cues are a picture matched to a similar image on the schedule, or to a pencil to check off the schedule.

Teach the person to use his or her schedule. Like any new concept, using a schedule is something that you need to teach. For an individual with little or low verbal understanding, you can do this by placing the object or picture in their hand and gently physically guiding them (from behind) to go to the desired area.

For individuals with more verbal skills, you can explain the concept of schedules, and then show them how to use their schedule, either by guiding them or by modeling using the schedule yourself. For very bright children, you might also choose to show them the scheduling system you use in your own life, to help them understand why it is important to use a schedule, and to help them accept using it.

Be consistent and modify as needed. Incorporating the schedule into a regular routine will help the person develop more independence with it and will maximize its benefits. The person will quickly learn to trust the schedule, and will be more able to handle changes in their schedule and daily routine. Having a child experience the benefits of keeping a schedule when they are young, you are paving the way for them to use one as they grow. This will become important as they need to become increasingly organized and independent.

Teaching a student how to use a schedule

- Guided practice
- Independent practice
- Systematically fading components of the schedule (fading the prompt, not the structure)
- Some students may always need redirection to follow through their schedule.

Key to success with using a schedule

- Stick to the schedule
- Use it consistently – not just every now and then
- Create it to be both cognitively and age appropriate

Some considerations to keep in mind when using a visual schedule:

- Some visual schedules can take time to create and maintain. Typically, the work put in up front saves time in the end dealing with behavior problems and prompting your son or daughter through activities.

- You may need to make modifications along the way. If the schedule does not seem to be working, this typically means that it needs to be adjusted, not that schedules are ineffective or unnecessary for your child.
- Visual schedules do not need to be perfect, computer printed, and laminated. Many children respond to handwritten schedules with hand drawn pictures.
- If your child is not interested in his schedule, consider incorporating a special interest, a reward system (for older children who understand cause and effect), or changing it if the schedule is confusing or unappealing in some way.
- Your child may or may not need a schedule all the time. Consider using it during times of the day when your child seems to have difficulty following directions, being independent, or is or is consistently anxious about what will happen.
- As you child grows and learns new skills, the format of the schedule will grow with him.

Using schedules to teach flexibility

One of the key items of evidence to support the diagnosis of autism is an insistence on sameness and an inflexible adherence to routines extending down to minute details with things like the placement of toys, silverware, or bath towel or into types of foods available at certain meals and the order in which they may be eaten or the exact words and even tone of voice used in a bedtime story. Not all changes are equal and not all ASD people react the same way. Many autistics confronted with a minor change in their daily routine or living situation might feel uncomfortable but have sufficient self-control to show no outward signs.

Using visual aids and other methods of communicating that are easier for ASD individuals to understand can also be helpful. Much of the shock of changes comes from the difficulty they have in making sense of what is happening in short time. Sensory and verbal communication deficits make it difficult for them to quickly grasp new situations. Accommodating their strengths in visual perception versus verbal and social skills when discussing changes can help them settle in more rapidly and feel more at ease with the situation.

Flexibility is crucial, as schedules may need to change occasionally. Leave room for spontaneity, and adjust the schedule when necessary. For example, if plans change, communicate it visually to prepare the individual for the adjustment.

For example, adding a question mark icon on the schedule can prepare the student for an unexpected change or something exciting that is about to occur. This could mean that seeing a question mark icon, they know something different is about to happen. Gradually, unexpected changes become part of their day and they get manageable. We are teaching flexibility through predictability.

Important points to remember

There is no good or bad schedule.
The best schedule is the one that the student uses independently.

A common mistake while creating a schedule is using materials that do not match the student's developmental level.

In order for the student to use the schedule independently, the visual schedule must be meaningful to this particular student.

A mixed type of schedule is using the picture along with the word it represents.

A common puzzle is the fact that the student finishes an activity but not transit to next one independently.

Some students will remain prompt dependent no matter how much we try. It is considered a progress to finish each step independently.

06

The Work system

Goal of this Chapter: To define the Work System as a path to independence.

Individualized Work Systems – The Path to Independence

What is a Work System?

While the Visual Schedule tells the student where to go, the Work System tells them what to do once they arrive. The TEACCH Independent Work System is based on the clinical observation that most individuals on the autism spectrum possess significantly stronger visual-spatial processing skills compared to auditory processing. These systems are strategically designed to capitalize on these strengths, providing a predictable structure that minimizes reliance on verbal instructions.

Structural Design

To foster independence, every work system must be organized from **left-to-right** and **top-to-bottom**. A student should be able to look at their workstation and independently answer:

1. **What work** do I need to complete?
2. **How much** work is required? (Quantified by the number of folders, baskets, or icons).
3. **How do I know I am finished?** (The material is gone or placed in a "Finished" area).
4. **What happens next?** (Access to a reinforcing activity or the next transition).

The Role of the Schedule

While physical baskets provide a clear visual of the work, the inclusion of a schedule or to-do list is a critical, yet often overlooked, element. The schedule acts as the teaching platform that transitions

the student from a passive role (working only on what is placed directly in front of them) to an active role.

The ultimate goal is for the student to use their schedule to:

- Identify required tasks.
- Retrieve materials independently from another area.
- Return completed work to the designated "Finished" location.

Content Selection: Mastered Tasks Only

A common implementation error is placing emerging skills into a work system and expect the student work alone. It is imperative to remember: Independent work systems are designed to teach independence, not new academic concepts. The student must previously master all tasks placed in the system at some point.

If a student requires a prompt to complete a task, the task is inappropriate for the work system. We teach math and language in other settings; we use the work system to teach the student how to apply those skills autonomously. The time and area for teaching the skills is indicated on their schedule (working with Mary) or by placing an extra card on a task on the work system to ask for help.

Task Completion and the "Finished" Area

When a task is completed, it must be placed in a designated "Finished" area (a basket, folder, bin, back to the initial place). It is essential that students do not take their work apart after completion. Taking work apart undermines the "concept of finished". Just as a typical student would not be asked to erase an essay after writing it, a student with ASD should not be asked to disassemble a completed task unless he wants to. Maintaining the integrity of finished work mimics real-world expectations, such as in vocational

settings (e.g., a restaurant worker does not empty salt shakers after filling them).

Evidence-Based Benefits

Research (Hume & Odom, 2007; Bennett, Reichow, & Wolery, 2011) supports the efficacy of independent work systems in:

- Increasing on-task behavior.
- Significantly reducing teacher prompts.
- Decreasing stereotypical or self-stimulatory behaviors by providing a clear, functional focus.

By implementing these systems correctly, we provide students with an organizational strategy they can generalize to homework, chores, leisure activities, and future employment.

Why Do Work Systems Fail?

Many students still rely on verbal instructions. This often happens because the tasks are too difficult and complicated for their developmental level or the concept of "Finished" is not visually clear.

Many teachers or parents stop using schedules and work systems because their student or child show dislike or refuse to follow through. This is natural to happen because no one likes to be told what to do.

Many times, it feels overwhelming to create the schedule and the sub-routines for the whole day and consider everything that needs to be done or may change unexpectedly during the day.

What can be done then?

To help the student follow a routine and a schedule build in motivation incorporate preferred activities into the schedule. This could be spending time with a special person, getting access to a

favorite toy or snack, getting an electronic device, etc. Bear in mind that it needs a long period of practice (depending on the individual) to start following the schedule independently. When an expanse of schedule is completed, offer positive reinforcement toward something special. Working towards a goal will get the person engaged.

When creating a daily schedule there in no need to include everything. For starters, that have just introduced to schedules, structure only chunks of the day.

Scheduled breaks

Scheduled breaks are, as they sound, regularly scheduled breaks during activities that can help students engage in learning without exhibiting disruptive behaviors. A scheduled break can assist students to find relief from overwhelming sensory or social environments and may help to reduce stress or anxiety during group activities. Students should learn to recognize when they feel overwhelmed and ask for a break pointing to the break card. This strategy requires providing clear rules of how to use and when to use break cards as well as creating a system to monitor overuse.

Incorporating scheduled breaks during lesson time or recess time to teach a shared activity can be done simply by putting a break card on both students' work system/ visual schedule and an activity card directing them to a specific place for this particular thing.

For students in the classroom, the teacher may provide all students with scheduled breaks or individual students may be provided with short, frequent breaks on a timed scheduled. These breaks may consist of very short periods of unscheduled free time, or planned breaks that are longer and involve a preferred task or opportunity to leave the room (e.g. time in the book corner, running

an errand). Using a timer that will alert them that it is time for a break is another strategy.

The literature on behavior support also includes the more technical term 'non-contingent escape'. This involves providing students with a scheduled break, generally from non-preferred activities, that is based on time intervals, rather than being contingent on a particular behavior or skill. There is some evidence that these scheduled breaks can help to decrease disruptive behaviors, especially when a behavior is related to an escape function. By providing the scheduled breaks, the student has less need to use disruptive behaviors to escape from a non-preferred task.

07

Structured Activities

Goal of this Chapter: To explain how to organize materials within a single task in a Work System.

Creating structured activities – Making every task "Self-Explanatory"

Activities need to be visually clear and meaningful to the child. If the child can't touch, see or hold the activity, he/she will likely not engage in the activity nor find it engaging enough for him/her to give attention. Visual instructions tell the child what he/she needs to do, visual organization involves providing the required materials needed to complete the task, neatly organized and stable. Finally, visual clarity helps the child on the autism spectrum know what he/she is doing because it is clear and it is not visually distracting, overwhelming, or confusing.

What is a structured activity?

While the Work System organizes a sequence of jobs, a structured activity organizes the materials within a single task. The goal is for the student to understand how to complete the activity simply by looking at the materials, without needing verbal instructions. This is critical because oftentimes teachers define structure solely as "visual aids," often missing this deeper layer of task design.

The Three Components of Visual Organization

While designing structured activities, we focus on three elements:

- Visual Clarity: Highlighting the most important part of the task (e.g., color-coding the slot where a coin should be dropped).
- Visual Instructions: Showing the student the sequence of the specific task through a sample or a picture-guide.
- Visual Organization of Materials: Limiting the materials to only what is necessary and using containers to stabilize them, reducing the fatigue often caused by cluttered spaces.

Creating shared activities

Autistic students have a great difficulty in learning social norms. In addition to the limited opportunities for peer interactions, creating structured shared activities can have a great impact to their social skills.

Creating group activities with clear roles and instructions help students interact, stay engaged and build positive social skills. Teaching social scripts and providing guided practice for initiating and maintaining conversations help students develop and maintain relationships and friendships.

Social Skills planning matrix

Life Stage	Core Social Target	Common Autism-Specific Barrier	Recommended Support Strategy
Early Years	Functional & Parallel Play	Sensory Overload in shared spaces	**Visual Boundaries:** Use mats or tape to define individual play zones.
Primary/Elementary	Turn-Taking & Rules	Cognitive Rigidity (Need to win/follow "my" rules)	**Social Stories:** Scripts explaining that "losing is part of the game."
Secondary/Middle	Navigating Nuance	Literal Thinking (Difficulty with sarcasm/slang)	**Visual Cards:** Direct instruction on common social expressions.
Transition/High School	Workplace Conduct	Difficulty with non-verbal feedback (Eye contact/Tone)	**Video Self-Modeling:** Recording the student to help them self-evaluate.
Young Adult	Professional Independence	Social Exhaustion / Sensory Sensitivity	**Sensory Audits:** Identifying "quiet zones" in the workplace or college.

08

Social & Life skills

Goal of this Chapter: To view social and life skills as observable, teachable behaviors rather than abstract concepts.

Developing Social Competency

Social skills are the foundation of integration, yet they represent one of the most complex areas of development for students on the spectrum. In the TEACCH framework, social skills are viewed not just as "making friends" but rather as a series of observable behaviors that can be structured and taught.

The Multi-Faceted Nature of Social Skills

Social interaction is a "composite skill" made up of several moving parts. Beyond basic conversation, educators should focus on:

- Emotional Regulation: Managing the "big feelings" that come with social outcomes, such as losing a game or receiving a correction.
- Accepting Feedback: Learning how to respond to compliments or criticism — a vital skill for future workplace success.
- Group Participation: Navigating the logistics of proximity, turn-taking, and shared attention.

Evidence-Based Instructional Strategies

Social skills are best taught through structured, visual, and repetitive methods. Effective strategies include:

- Social Stories™: Short, personalized narratives that describe a social situation and suggest appropriate responses.
- Video Modeling: Recording a behavior (or watching a pre-recorded clip) so the student can visualize the "social target."
- Role-Playing: Practicing interactions in a safe, controlled environment before attempting them in real-time.

Developmental Milestones and Age-Appropriate Focus

Social goals must evolve as the student matures. A spiral curriculum approach ensures skills remain relevant:

- Early Childhood: Functional play and parallel play.
- School Age: Following group directions and collaborative turn-taking.
- Adolescence: Navigating complex peer dynamics, dating, and physical boundaries.
- Young Adulthood: Professional conduct, cohabitation skills, and self-advocacy.

Navigating the "Culture of Autism" in Social Settings

Interventions must account for the specific diagnostic traits that impact social flow:

- **Cognitive Rigidity:** A preference for strict routines can clash with the unpredictable nature of social play. Educators can help by building "flexibility" into the visual schedule.
- **Literal Thinking:** Many students struggle with idioms or sarcasm. Explicit instruction in figurative language is often necessary.
- **Theory of Mind:** Difficulty seeing perspectives other than their own can lead to misunderstandings; visual tools can help "map out" what others might be thinking or feeling.

The Impact of Sensory Processing

Social success is often tethered to sensory comfort. A student who is hypersensitive to noise may appear "anti-social" simply because they are trying to escape a painful auditory environment.

Handbook Tip: Before labeling a social interaction as a "behavioral refusal," assess the environment. Are the lights too bright? Is the room too loud? Adjusting the sensory environment is often the first step in unlocking social potential.

Incorporating social goals in the classroom

Autism can impact social skills by making it harder for individuals to understand social cues and norms, leading to difficulties in forming and maintaining relationships. This can result in challenges in communication, interpreting others' emotions, and engaging in typical social interactions.

Autistic individuals can develop strong social skills through tailored support, practice, and understanding. While their approach to socializing may differ from neurotypical individuals, they can still form meaningful connections and relationships.

Children with autism can learn from their neurotypical peers when it comes to social skills. If the child with autism is not yet exposed to children his age (who are not on the spectrum), then a parent and a teacher can arrange playdates to make this happen.

Some autistic children can learn a skill within a certain environment but will stop applying the skill when the situation changes. Parents, teachers, and caregivers must all work together to help a child with autism become regular with their ability to socialize.

For school-age children with autism, attending school itself is a challenge they face every day. In addition to academic challenges, they also deal with other children in their class.

Teachers can help children with autism with their social skills by:

- Making the classroom comfortable
- Encourage the child to take part in activities
- Pick topics and toys that they might have a great interest in
- Model good social skills

The Benefits of Structured Play for Social Skills

Structured play provides a predictable environment where autistic children can practice essential social skills like sharing, turn-taking, and communication. By using activities with clear rules and integrating tools like visual schedules and social scripts, children can transition from solitary to cooperative play with reduced anxiety. This structured approach builds social confidence and paves the way for meaningful peer interactions.

Selecting Appropriate Activities

When choosing recreational activities, consider the following factors to ensure engagement and comfort:

- **Interests:** Align activities with the child's passions to increase motivation.
- **Learning Styles:** Adapt instructions (visual, auditory, or hands-on) to match how the child learns best.
- **Sensory Needs:** Select activities that fit the child's sensory profile and modify the environment to be "autism-friendly."
- **Structure:** Provide clear instructions and predictable routines to create a sense of security.

Recommended Physical & Group Activities

Physical activities offer exercise, sensory input, and social opportunities. Swimming and bowling are particularly well-suited for autistic children. Additionally, cooperative encourage teamwork and communication, fostering social and emotional development in a fun context.

Life Skills planning matrix

Strategy	Purpose	Detailed Implementation
Daily Living Routines	Builds independence in personal care	Teach routines like brushing teeth or dressing using step-by-step visuals or checklists. Use task analysis to monitor progress.
Money Management Skills	Prepares students for handling finances	Introduce activities like identifying coins, making small purchases, and budgeting using real or play money.
Cooking Basics	Teaches essential survival skills	Practice simple recipes, focusing on safety (e.g., using a microwave). Incorporate measuring and counting for academic reinforcement.
Community Navigation	Increases confidence in public spaces	Teach map reading, bus schedules, and basic directions. Use supervised field trips for real-life practice.
Laundry and Cleaning	Builds responsibility and home maintenance skills	Practice folding clothes, sorting laundry by color, and using cleaning tools like wipes and brooms. Provide clear, simple instructions.
Time Management Skills	Helps students organize their daily activities	Use alarms or planners to teach how to allocate time for tasks like homework or breaks. Gradually reduce reminders.
Healthy Meal Choices	Encourages nutrition awareness	Teach students to identify healthy food options using visuals. Role-play grocery shopping to apply knowledge.
Social Etiquette Training	Prepares students for appropriate interactions	Practice greetings, table manners, and phone etiquette. Use role-playing for reinforcement.
Basic First Aid Awareness	Builds safety and problem-solving skills	Teach how to clean minor cuts, apply bandages, and call for help in emergencies. Use visuals and practice sessions.
Job Readiness Skills	Prepares for employment opportunities	Teach filling out simple forms, following instructions, and basic workplace etiquette through simulated activities.

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The classroom becomes the larger world as the student applies the learned tasks to naturally occurred environments in which those skills have a direct purpose: **Communicating independently.**

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