Factsheet: Visual Timelines

Visual Timelines - Practitioners

What is a visual timeline?

A visual timetable or timeline is a visual account of a task or a child's routine throughout the day. A visual timeline can be used individually with children or as part of a whole group setting. The links at the end of this fact sheet show examples of visual timelines.

Why are visual timelines useful?

Visual timelines can be used to support children in a number of ways. For example, children with difficulty understanding language may benefit from visual timelines because of the extra processing time they allow. Visual timelines can also help support any child who is anxious, perhaps because they are new to the setting or don't understand routines. Many children learn better when supported with visual pictures because they tend to be visual learners. Therefore, visual timetables can maximise a child's strengths to support other areas of development that are perhaps more difficult. Some suggest that using symbols and visual timelines as part of a multisensory teaching approach helps children behave well, develop literacy, be motivated, remind and reinforce concepts they know and lead to more independence. They can also help children who have difficulty accessing text. The extra visual support can be useful to children who are learning English as an additional Language.

We have a child in our setting with a Specific Language Impairment and have been told he has a poor memory. Would a visual timeline help?

Some children with Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN) have poor memory for what they hear. Working memory is where information is held briefly, while something else is done (for example, instructions are remembered while they are being carried out). Children with Specific Language Impairment (SLI) find it much harder to remember what they have heard than other children. Visual support strategies such as visual timelines allow children more time to process information. Information in working memory is easily lost through distraction or overload. If there are no external reminders of what they need to be thinking about, and the original verbal instruction has been forgotten, children might guess, become distracted, or give up.

How can a visual timeline support a child's learning?
Visual timelines can support children's learning because they:

- are stable over time

- are relevant and meaningful to the child.

- attract and hold attention

- may use a strong learning modality i.e. a child who is a visual learner

- reduce anxiety

- make concepts more concrete, e.g. before, after, morning, afternoon, first, next

- can be used as prompts

- model what is important in a task

- communicate things that cannot otherwise be understood

- help individuals cope with and prepare for changes

- increase independence

- can be individualised

- help a child's sequencing understanding and skills

- have a left to right orientation which reflects reading strategies

- encourage children to 'read'

- help them learn the written words relevant to their day.

How can a visual timeline help a child's thinking skills?
Visual timelines can be used to help bridge the gap between what is a real, visible object and what is more abstract and less obvious. For example:

- It could help to make other people's thoughts, feelings and intentions more concrete.

- It puts less of a demand on remembering and allows more resources for thinking about the task.

- It helps children identify the final 'goal' of the task where it might be hard for them to do this otherwise.

I work in a nursery and it has been recommended that a visual timeline is used with a child in my setting. What do I need to think about when making one?
Visual timelines should be made to suit the child and their environment. In terms of options, they don't have to be linear or to restrict choices or free time. Depending on the child, they can help to build the timeline for their day. The language and questions used to introduce the timeline should fit the child's level of understanding. Timelines can be used for whole groups of children e.g. whole class routine or for an individual child. Timelines may only be used for a lesson/speech and language therapy session, a whole week, or for

a longer period of time. They can use photographs, pictures or symbols with or without words.

Talk to your local speech and language therapy department about any symbol packages they may use. Progress along the timeline can be tracked by removing pictures (and posting them in the 'finished' box), or by moving an arrow along. Transitions can be signalled and monitored in certain ways e.g. by pupils looking at the clock or an adult signing 'finished'. They can include pupils' responsibilities for some activities e.g. Kate prepares the fruit today (shown by a photo of her cutting an apple). Timelines can gradually become purely written as the pupil learns the relevant words and concepts.

How can I make sure that the visual timeline will work effectively?

How visual timelines are used is probably the most important issue. Visual timelines should be used as part of an interactive approach. Where possible, get the child/children involved in setting up the timeline - this helps encourage active learning. Timelines should be used consistently; they should be regularly referred to throughout the day/session. Make sure the language you use to support the timeline is appropriate to the child's/children's level of understanding. Timelines can be used alongside other approaches such as signing. Timelines should always be visible and at the right height for the child/children in question!

For examples of how visual timetables and other visual support can be used go to:

www.widgit.com information on how to make a visual timetable and examples
usefulwiki.com/displays/2006-11-13/visual-timetables/ an example of a 'wall' of schedules.
www.pecs.org.uk/shop/asp/default.asp resources for visual support including visual time tables.
teacch.com/educational-approaches/structured-teaching-teacch-staff

www.do2learn.com/ to download pictures and make a visual timeline

www.symbolworld.org.uk to download pictures

www.pdictionary.com/ for pictures

If you child has autism or Asperger's syndrome you can find out more on how visual support can help them at www.nas.org.uk/visualsupport