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Visual Supports & Communication

A practical resource guide for neurodivergent people and the people who support them

Communication styles, Now and Next boards, visual timetables, core boards, One Plans, EHC plans and more — with examples and printable templates

See it | **Understand it** | **Feel ready**

Welcome

Why visual supports help

Many neurodivergent people — children and adults — understand and remember information better when they can **see** it. Spoken words disappear as soon as they are said, but a picture, symbol or written word stays there, so the person can look at it again whenever they need to.

Visual supports can…

- Make the day predictable and reduce anxiety
- Help people understand what is happening and what comes next
- Give a way to make choices and express needs
- Support independence with everyday tasks

They are for everyone

Visuals are not only for people who do not talk. Many speaking children and adults use calendars, lists, reminders and apps every day. Visual supports are a normal, respectful way to communicate.

About the examples in this guide

The pictures in this guide are simple examples drawn for Sycamore Trust to show how each resource works. Use whatever suits the person best: real photos, symbols, drawings, written words or real objects. Ask a speech and language therapist for advice about the right system.

What's inside

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1 Communication styles

Everyone communicates — in different ways

Communication is much more than speech. Every way a person communicates is valid and deserves to be understood and respected.

Spoken words

Some people talk fluently but may still find it hard to understand long instructions, jokes or hidden meanings, or to talk when stressed.

Echolalia and gestalt language

Repeating words or whole phrases, for example from films or songs. This is meaningful communication. Many children learn language in 'chunks' first (gestalt language processing).

Non-speaking or minimally speaking

Some people do not use speech, or only sometimes. They may communicate through sounds, gestures, pointing, leading an adult, AAC or behaviour.

AAC

Augmentative and Alternative Communication. **Low-tech:** picture cards, boards and books. **High-tech:** speech-generating devices and apps.

Signing

Makaton uses signs and symbols alongside speech. **British Sign Language (BSL)** is a full language used by Deaf people and others.

Picture exchange

Handing a picture to someone to ask for something. **PECS** is a structured picture-exchange system taught by trained practitioners.

Objects of reference

Real objects that stand for an activity, such as a cup for 'drink' or a towel for 'swimming'. Helpful for people who find pictures hard to understand.

Writing and typing

Many people communicate more easily by writing, texting or typing than by speaking, especially when anxious or overwhelmed.

Behaviour and body language

Behaviour is communication. Look for what a person might be telling you: 'I am overwhelmed', 'I am in pain' or 'I need a break'.

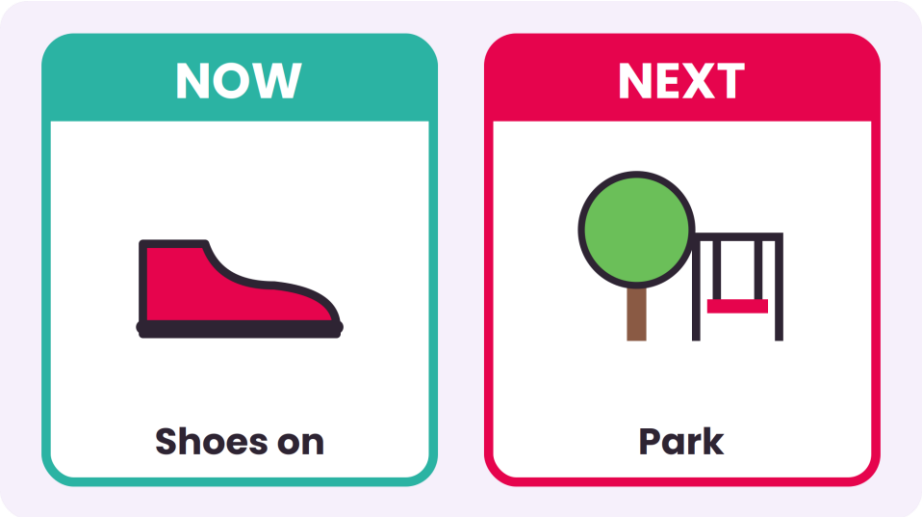
Communication-friendly tips

Instead of…	Try…
"Come on, put your shoes on now, we're going to be late, hurry up!"	"Shoes on." (Show the Now and Next board. Wait.)
Asking the same question again straight away	Wait at least 10 seconds for a reply before repeating.
"Do you want to go to the park?" (demand-heavy for some children)	"I wonder if the swings are free today." (declarative language)

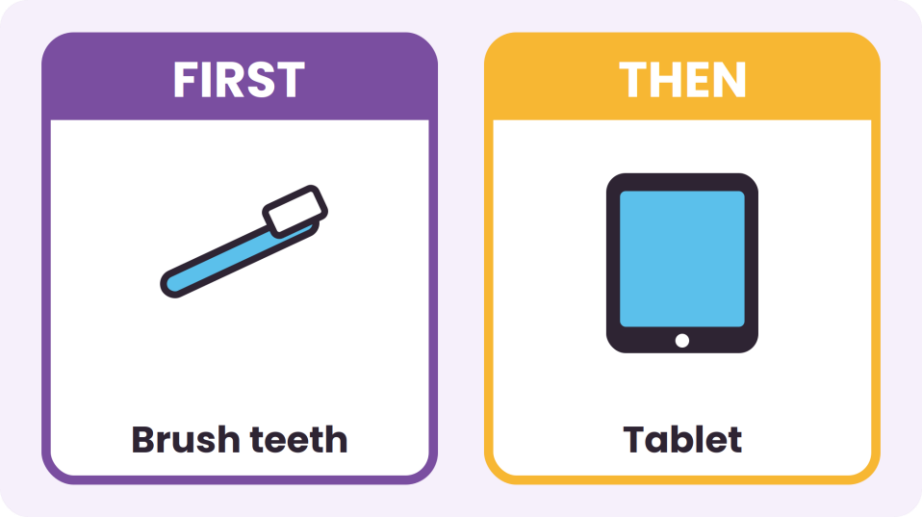
“It's raining cats and dogs!”	“It's raining a lot.” (say what you mean)

2 Now and Next, First and Then

Simple boards that show what is happening



A **Now and Next** board shows what is happening now and what will happen next. A **First and Then** board works the same way and is often used to show that something less preferred comes first, followed by something the person enjoys. They are simple, quick to use, and help reduce uncertainty.

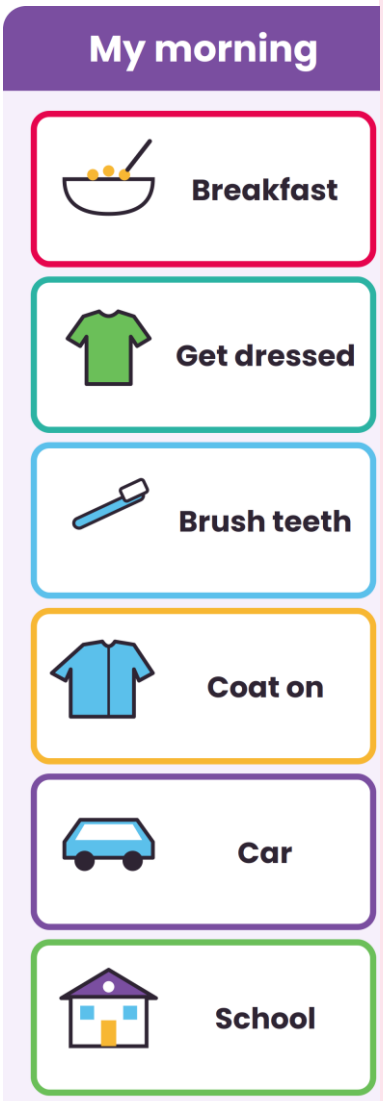


How to use a Now and Next board

1. Choose two pictures: the current activity and the next one.
2. Show the board and say the words simply: “Now shoes. Next park.”
3. When the first activity is finished, remove that picture, move ‘Next’ across to ‘Now’, and add a new ‘Next’.
4. Always follow through with what the board says, so the person learns they can trust it.
5. Keep it somewhere easy to see and take with you, for example on a key ring or in a bag.

3 Visual timetables

Seeing the whole day or part of it

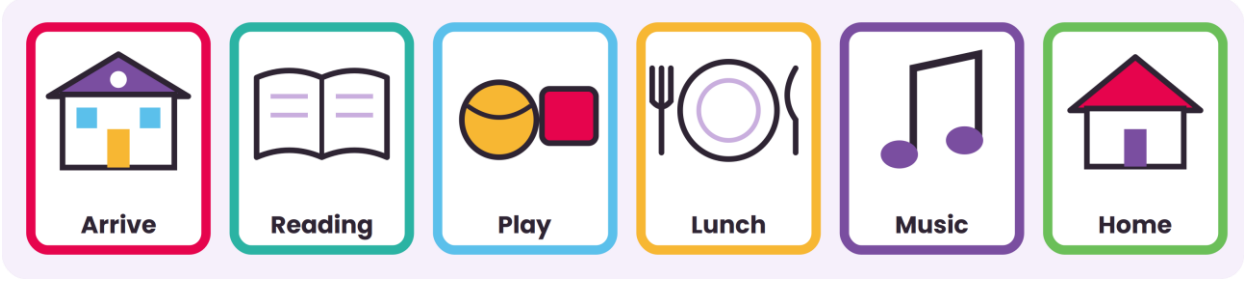


A **visual timetable** shows a sequence of activities in order. It can show a whole day, a morning, or just a few steps. It can go from top to bottom or left to right.

Tips

- Start small: three or four pictures may be enough.
- Go through it together at the start of the day or activity.
- When an activity is finished, remove it and put it in a 'finished' pocket or box, or turn it over.
- Use a question mark or 'change' card to show that something different is happening.
- Older children and adults may prefer a written list, a phone calendar or a planner.

Example: a school day strip



4 Choice boards

Helping people make their own choices

A **choice board** shows a small number of options. The person can point to, touch, pick up or look at the option they want. Making choices builds independence, reduces frustration and shows respect for the person's preferences.

Getting started

- Start with two choices, both things the person likes
- Hold them up and name each one
- Give what they choose straight away

Building up

- Add more options over time
- Use choice boards for food, activities, clothes and places
- Include ‘something else’ so they can tell you if none fit

5 Core boards

A small set of words that says a lot

Core words are the small number of words we use most often, in many different situations — words like **I, want, more, go, stop, help, not, like** and **finished**. A small set of core words makes up most of what people say every day. A **core board** puts these words in the same place every time, so the person can learn where to find them and combine them to say many different things.

The colours in this example follow a common colour-coding system for word types. Many AAC systems use similar colours but check which one the person's therapist or device uses.

How to use a core board: model, model, model

1. Keep the board with the person all day, everywhere, not just at set times.
2. **Model** by pointing to the words on the board as you talk: point to 'more' while saying "more bubbles". This is sometimes called aided language modelling.
3. Do not expect or demand the person to point back. Children learn to use AAC by seeing others use it, the same way they learn speech by hearing it.
4. Respond to every attempt to communicate, even if it seems random at first.
5. Keep words in the same place so the person can find them without searching.

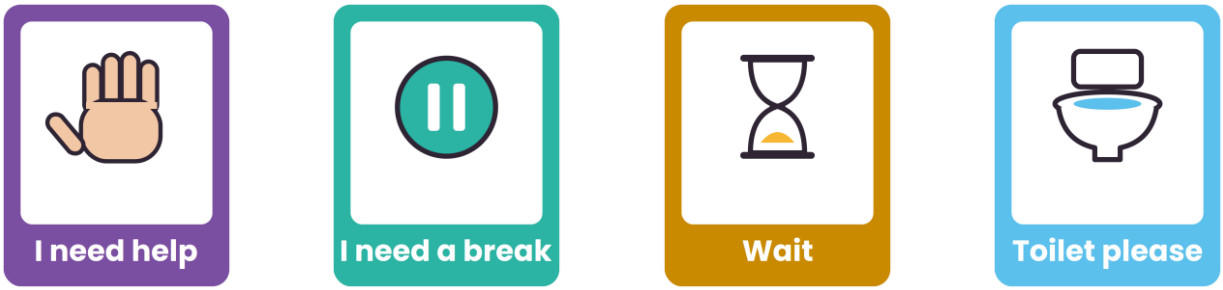
6 Feelings, calm and help cards

Tools to notice, name and ask

Feelings scale

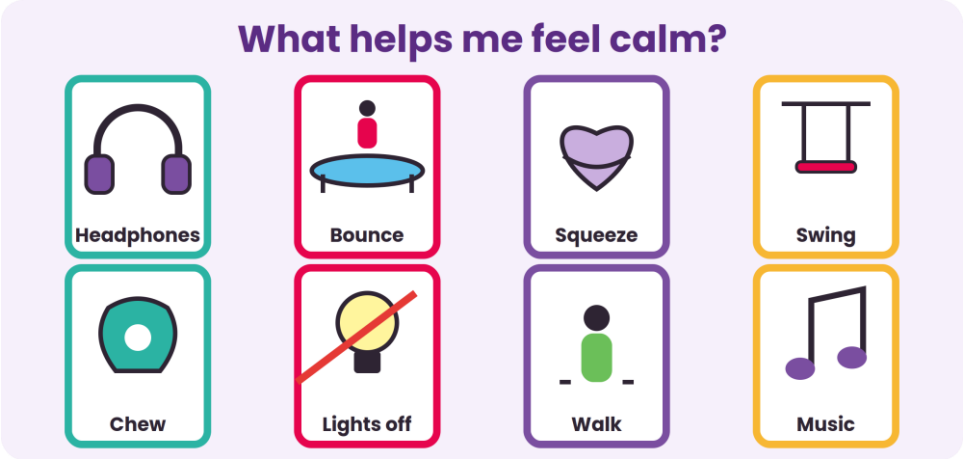
A 1 to 5 scale helps people notice how they feel and share it, using numbers and colours instead of words. Agree together what each number looks and feels like for that person, and what helps at each level.

Help, break and wait cards



Cards like these let a person ask for help, a break or the toilet without having to find the words. Teach what each card means, keep them within easy reach, and **always respond** when a card is used, so the person learns it works. A 'wait' card, used with a timer, helps show that something will happen soon.

Sensory calm menu



A calm menu shows the things that help a person feel calm and regulated. Make one together, with the person's own choices.

7 Social stories and sequences

Explaining situations and breaking down tasks

A **social story** is a short, simple story that describes a situation, what usually happens and why. It helps a person know what to expect in new or tricky situations, such as a haircut, a trip to the dentist or starting school. The approach was developed by Carol Gray.

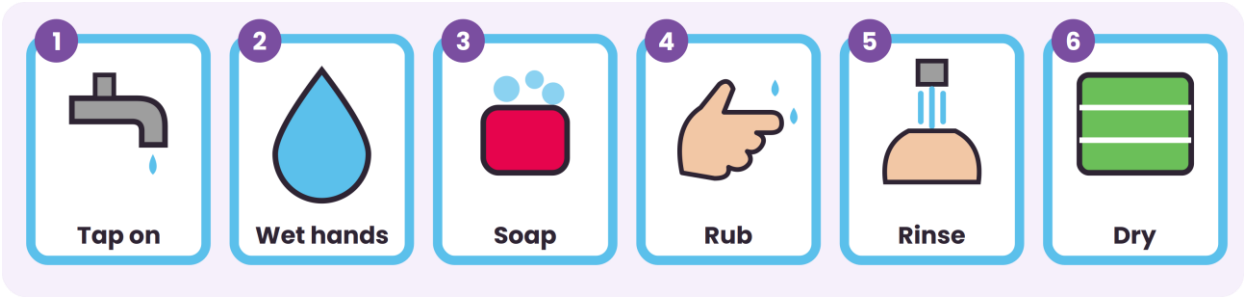
Tips for writing a social story

- Write from the person's point of view ("I…") or as a description
- Mostly describe what happens, and keep it positive and reassuring
- Use real photos where possible
- Read it together often before the event
- Avoid words like 'always' or 'never', in case plans change

Task sequences

Breaking a task into small visual steps helps with everyday skills like washing hands, getting dressed or making a drink. Put the sequence where the task happens, such as by the sink.

- Start with a few steps, then add more
- Point to each step as it is done



8 One-page profiles and One Plans

Person-centred plans that put the person first

A **one-page profile** is a short summary of a person that anyone supporting them can read quickly. A **One Plan** is a person-centred support plan used by many schools and settings for children who need SEN support. It may also be called a SEN Support Plan, My Support Plan or Individual Support Plan. The name varies, but the idea is the same: the child and family are at the centre of the plan.

Example: one-page profile

What people like and admire about me	*Kind, funny, brilliant at jigsaws, knows every dinosaur name.*
What is important to me	*My blue cup, trains, knowing what is happening next, my grandma.*
How best to support me	*Use short sentences and pictures. Give me time to answer. Warn me before changes. Let me wear ear defenders in the hall.*

Example: what a One Plan usually includes

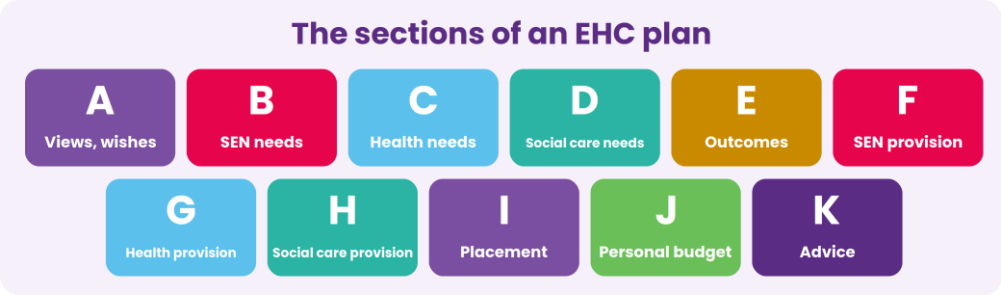
Section	Example
All about me	My strengths, interests, what matters to me and how I communicate.
My needs	"Ayo finds it hard to understand spoken instructions and becomes anxious at busy times."
Outcomes (what we want to achieve)	"By the end of the spring term, Ayo will use a Now and Next board to move between activities with no more than one reminder."
Support and who will give it	"Key adult to go through a visual timetable each morning. Speech and language programme 3 times a week for 15 minutes with the teaching assistant."
How we will know it is working	What we will look for, and how progress will be recorded.
Review	A date to meet again — usually each term — with the child's and family's views included.

A One Plan follows the **Assess, Plan, Do, Review** cycle. Parents should be involved at every stage and get a copy of the plan.

9 EHC plans explained

Education, Health and Care Plans

An **Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan** is a legal document for children and young people aged 0–25 who need more support than is usually available through SEN support. It describes the person's needs and the support they must receive. The council must make sure the provision is delivered, and Section F should be **specific** — what, how often, how long and by whom. You can comment on the draft and appeal; organisations such as SENDIASS and IPSEA can help for free.



Section	What it covers
A	The views, interests and aspirations of the child or young person and their family.
B	Special educational needs — all of them, described in detail.
C and D	Health needs and social care needs related to their SEN or disability.
E	Outcomes: what the child or young person should achieve, for example in the next key stage.
F	Special educational provision: the support that must be provided for every need in Section B.
G and H	Health provision and social care provision.
I	The name and type of school, college or setting.
J	Any personal budget and how it will be used.
K	The advice and information gathered during the assessment, attached as appendices.

What good wording looks like

Vague	Specific and quantified
“Access to speech and language therapy as needed.”	“Speech and language therapy: one 30-minute session each week with a qualified speech and language therapist, plus a daily 10-minute programme delivered by a trained teaching assistant.”

Outcome: “To improve communication.”	Outcome: “By the end of Year 2, Sam will use his AAC device to request help and make choices across the school day.”

10 Other helpful resources

More tools to try

Visual timers

Sand timers or timer apps that show time passing. Useful for waiting, turn-taking and warning that an activity will end.

Communication passport

A booklet explaining how a person communicates and what their signs, sounds or words mean. Great for new staff.

Hospital or health passport

Tells health staff about the person's needs, how to communicate and what helps during appointments.

Alert cards and lanyards

An autism alert card or the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower lanyard can help others understand that someone may need more time or support.

Scripts and cue cards

Written or picture prompts for things like ordering food, answering the phone or asking for help.

Sleep and behaviour diaries

Tracking sleep, meals, moods and events can reveal patterns and help you find what works.

Ask Sycamore Trust

Our Family Services team can help with visual supports, social stories and practical resources, and can support you with plans and meetings.

020 8517 9317 | Services & Support - Sycamore Trust

11 Making and using visuals

Tips and where to find symbols

Choose the right type

- Real objects → photos → symbols → written words
- Start with what the person understands best
- Keep the same style across home and school

Make them last

- Laminate cards and use Velcro dots
- Make spares of the most-used cards
- Keep a set in a bag or on a key ring

Use them consistently

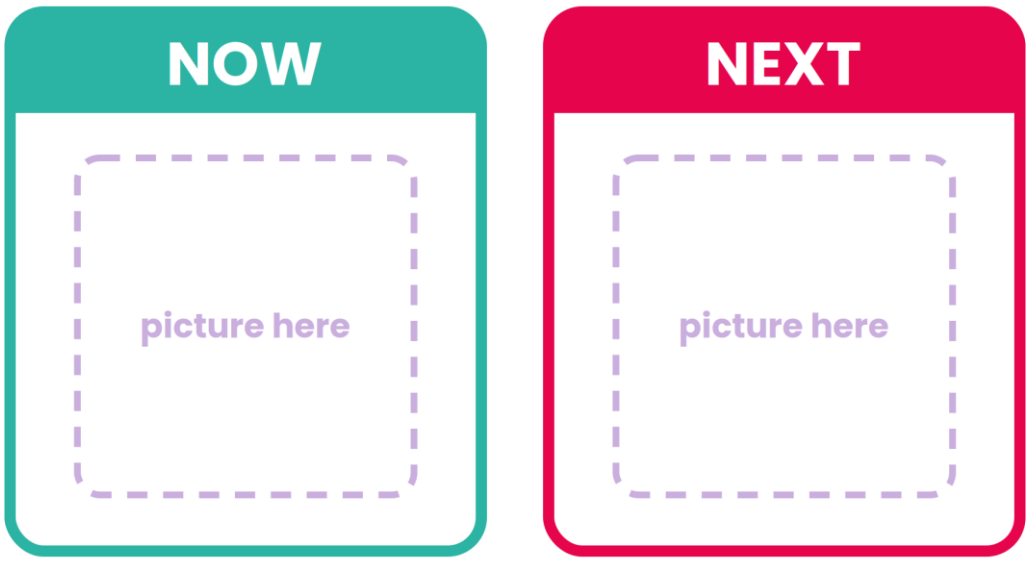
- Use them every day, not only when things are hard
- Everyone around the person should use them
- Review and update them as the person grows

Organisation	How they can help	Website and contact
National Autistic Society – visual supports	Guidance on using visual supports.	autism.org.uk – Visual supports
ARASAAC	A large collection of free symbols to download.	arasaac.org
Makaton	Information about Makaton signs and symbols, and training.	makaton.org
PECS UK	Information and training on the Picture Exchange Communication System.	pecs-unitedkingdom.com
Communication Matters	The UK charity for AAC, with information for families.	communicationmatters.org.uk
ACE Centre	Advice and free resources on AAC and assistive technology.	acecentre.org.uk
Carol Gray Social Stories	Information from the creator of social stories.	carolgraysocialstories.com
Speech and Language UK	Help with children's talking and understanding.	speechandlanguage.org.uk
IPSEA	Free legal advice on EHC plans and SEN support.	ipsea.org.uk

12 Printable templates

Print, cut out and use

Now and Next board



My visual timetable

1	picture		☐ finished
2	picture		☐ finished
3	picture		☐ finished
4	picture		☐ finished

5	picture	☐ finished

My one-page profile

What people like and admire about me

What is important to me

How best to support me

How I communicate

Plan review notes

Outcome	Support agreed	What went well	Next steps

Thank you for reading

Sycamore Trust UK is a registered charity supporting autistic children, young people, adults and their families across Barking & Dagenham, Havering and Redbridge.

Call us	Visit us	Find us online
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Disclaimer

This guide gives **general information only**. It does not replace advice from a speech and language therapist, occupational therapist, teacher, SENCo, SENDIASS adviser or other qualified professional. Please ask a professional for advice about the communication system and supports that are right for an individual.

The example pictures and plans in this guide are illustrations created for Sycamore Trust UK. They are not official PECS, Makaton or other branded materials, and the names used in examples are made up.

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