

WHAT IS A VISUAL SCHEDULE?

A guide for parents and caregivers

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What is it really?

A visual schedule is **NOT a calendar or planner**. It is easily misinterpreted because of the word: **schedule**.

It's a **PICTURE-BASED TOOL** that helps children understand what's going to happen: especially when transitioning from one activity to another.

It breaks a routine or task into steps using **icons, pictures, or photos**. This makes it easier for young children or neurodivergent learners to feel safe, prepared, and more independent.

Who is it for?

- Children with **autism, ADHD, speech delays, or developmental delays**
 - Toddlers or preschoolers who **struggle with transitions**
 - Any child who **benefits from structure and predictability**
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What are the benefits?

<u>Benefit</u>	<u>How it helps your child</u>
Predictability	Reduces anxiety and meltdowns by showing what's coming next
Independence	Helps them complete tasks without being told over and over
Language Support	Boosts understanding even if they can't read or talk much yet
Emotional Regulation	Prevents overwhelm and confusion during transitions
Task Completion	Breaks tasks into smaller, manageable steps

Common Types of Visual Schedules

<u>Type</u>	<u>What it shows</u>	<u>Purpose / Benefit</u>	<u>Example</u>
First-Then Board	Simple 2-step action/reward	Helps complete non-preferred tasks	"First: Wash hands → Then: Biscuits"
Now-Next-Later Board	3-step visual showing current, upcoming, and later activity	Adds extra predictability and builds time awareness	"Now: Play → Next: Eat → Later: Playground"
Visual Countdown	Shows how much time or how many activities are left	Reduces anxiety by clarifying "how long"	"5-4-3-2-1" cards removed one by one
Daily Picture Schedule	Whole-day breakdown (morning to bedtime)	Builds routine understanding and predictability	Wake up → Eat → School → Home → Dinner → Sleep
Mini Routine / Task Strip	Step-by-step breakdown of one specific routine	Builds independence and sequencing	"1. Pants → 2. Shirt → 3. Socks → 4. Shoes"
Visual Timer (e.g., Time Timer)	Shows time passing with colour/fading visuals	Helps with transitions, wait time, or limiting preferred activities	"You can play until the red is gone"
Transition Cards	A single visual cue that something is about to change	Eases distress from unexpected shifts	"Time to clean up" / "Let's go to school"
Choice Boards	Visuals for making a choice between 2+ options	Promotes autonomy, reduces frustration in non-verbal kids	"Do you want: Car 🚗 or Book 📖?"
Emotion Check-in Chart	Visual tool to label and reflect feelings	Builds emotional awareness and regulation	"I feel 😡 Angry → I need 💧 Water"
Token Board	A reward system using visible progress	Builds persistence, delayed gratification, task tolerance	Earn 5 stars → Get bubbles
Break Cards / Help Cards	A visual communication tool for non-verbal requests	Empowers child to advocate for needs	"I need a break" / "Help me, please"
Wait Card / Wait Strip	Teaches patience with a visual reminder	Builds tolerance for delays and turn-taking	"WAIT" card held or placed in front of child

Many of these supports **can be combined**. For example:

- A child could follow a **mini visual schedule** using a **token board** for motivation, and use **break/help cards** to communicate needs during the routine.
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How to Create One at Home

Step 1: Choose your routine

- Morning, bedtime, playtime, mealtimes, toilet training

Step 2: Break it into 2–5 simple steps

- Use real photos, printed icons, or simple drawings

Step 3: Place it at your child's eye level

- Fridge, wall near toilet, bedroom door, or a small portable card

Step 4: Use it consistently and pair it with language

- Say: *"First brush teeth, then story. Look at the pictures."*
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Free Tools You Can Use

- **Twinkl** (printable routines)
- **LessonPix** (custom visuals)
- **Do2Learn** (free picture cards)
- **Canva** (design)