As anyone who lives and/or works with an individual who has Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) knows, there are many and varied difficulties in the areas of communication and social skills. Consequently, there are many ideas and therapeutic strategies that have been developed to promote skills and accommodate for ongoing challenges. Often, these strategies include using visual communication aids.

Visual communication aids are popular for many reasons, including the fact that most people with ASD are stronger visually than auditorily as well as the fact that visuals provide a more permanent way to give information (that is, they are always available, unlike spoken words which disappear into thin air). Most often, visuals can be used for concrete purposes (for example, listing clothing items that a child needs to put on before going outside). Additionally though, visuals also can be used as a means to convey more abstract information (e.g., social conventions, rules and routines).

One of the barriers that I often encounter when recommending visual communication aids is that people believe that they are difficult or specialized to create. While it sometimes is easier to have specific computer programs or a laminator at one’s disposal, it must be emphasized that visual communication aids can be developed and used by anyone who is interested. Really, all that is needed is some paper, a pen, and a little creativity. Visual aids can be created in the form of lists for those who can read and pictures (stick figures can often do the trick, otherwise, look in magazines, take photographs, or try looking online) for non-readers. Clear mac-tac or scotch tape can serve to protect and cover most of what can be created.

Another barrier that I sometimes encounter when discussing visual communication aids is the time that they take to develop. While I must concede that they do require a bit of extra effort and time, the pay-off comes in the form of saved time (and energy) later. For example, it might take 30 minutes to take photos and write a quick social story to help a resistant child understand and accept a bedtime routine. This effort however, should be paid back many times over by avoiding frustrating and time consuming bedtime battles on a daily basis. What small initial effort wouldn’t be worth that!

Lastly, I think it is important to emphasize that visual communication aids really can benefit all children who have access to them. Although they are often created specifically for an individual with ASD, countless times I have been told (and seen for myself) that typically developing children also respond very well to them (often better than the child with ASD does!). A classroom routine posted on a bulletin board helps all students know what activities will be part of their day and in what order they will occur; a family calendar helps all children in the home know what special events are upcoming and when; and a list posted by the door helps all individuals going outside remember what clothes and winter gear they need to put on (moms, dads, and teachers included - role modeling is important!).