



## Visual Communication Tools

**Introduction:** Visual communication tools can reduce cognitive and emotional load, enabling CYP (children and young people), particularly those with autism and/or anxiety, to understand expectations, express needs, and manage transitions. These tools help to externalise internal states (e.g. anxiety, confusion) and promote independence, self-regulation, and inclusion within learning environments.

**Target Audience:** These supports are designed for both **primary and secondary-aged pupils** who benefit from structured, concrete ways of processing and expressing information. This includes, but is not limited to, CYP with:

- Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC)
- Anxiety or selective mutism
- Speech, language and communication needs
- Emotional-based school nonattendance (EBSNA)

### Key Examples

- **Emotions Thermometers / Feelings Scales:** Helps CYP label and track emotional states. Can be personalised.
- **The Incredible 5-Point Scale:** Supports self-awareness of escalating emotions and corresponding coping strategies.
- **Traffic Light Cards / Understanding Cards:** Nonverbal ways to show “I’m fine / I need help / I don’t understand”.
- **Help / Break Cards:** Discreet, agreed-upon signals to request help or a sensory/movement break.
- **Visual Timetables / Now-Next-Then Boards:** Aid predictability and reduce anxiety around transitions.
- **Feelings Fans / Zones of Regulation Tools:** Assist with identifying and managing emotions.
- **One Page Profiles / Communication Passports:** Shared tools that summarise a CYP’s preferred methods of communication, triggers, and supports.
- **Sentence Starters / Picture Vocabulary Banks:** Facilitate expressive language and engagement in learning.
- **Pictorial Task Breakdown Sheets:** Help CYP understand the steps involved in completing a task.

### How to Use (Training / Implementation)

- **Collaborate with the CYP** to co-develop tools they feel comfortable using and for communication needs / purposes tailored to them.
- **Introduce tools proactively**, not reactively, and rehearse their use in calm times.
- **Train all staff** (teaching and support) on CYP’s individual communication plan.



- **Be consistent**, but flexible — tools should be reviewed and adapted regularly.
- **Model use** of visuals yourself. For example, refer to the visual timetable during transitions.

**Evidence and Outcomes:** Visual supports are strongly recommended in both clinical (e.g. NICE) and educational guidance for CYP with social communication differences. Research shows that visual tools support with:

- Improved **emotional regulation** (Gengoux et al., 2015; Kuoch & Mirenda, 2003)
- Increased **communication initiation** and reduced anxiety (Hodgdon, 1995)
- Support for **executive functioning** and task engagement (Bryan & Gast, 2000)

Tools like the **Incredible 5-Point Scale** and **Zones of Regulation** have published case studies showing improvements in behaviour, self-awareness and classroom engagement when embedded in a whole-school approach.

#### **Additional links and resources:**

- **Visual Support Templates (Widgit):** <https://www.widgit.com/resources>
- **Twinkl SEN Visuals Pack** (free resources): <https://www.twinkl.co.uk>
- **Do2Learn Visual Tools:** <https://do2learn.com>
- **NICE Guidelines (Autism in under 19s: support and management):** <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg170>