What is a visual resource?

- Anything you can look at that helps to improve communication and understanding.

- Everyone uses visuals whether you have autism or not – for example if you use a diary, this helps you to remember and understand what you are doing from day-to-day. If you did not have a diary to look at, you would probably forget what you are meant to be doing each day.

- Road signs, maps and sat-navs are another example of how we all use visuals. It would be very difficult to navigate our way to new places if we did not have access to these types of visuals which help to guide us.

- Visual resources do not need to be fancy – anyone can make them. Visuals can be as simple as drawing stick-men or writing a list to remind someone what they need to do.

- The most important thing to consider when using visual resources is that they are tailored to the individual.

Why do visual resources help people with autism?

- Many people with autism are 'visual thinkers' so information can be easier to process and understand if it is presented visually.

- Visuals are more permanent than words. Once something has been said it can quickly be forgotten or misinterpreted, whereas a visual will always stay the same and can be referred to as many times as needed.

- People with autism can find verbal communication difficult to understand because there are so many different bits of information to process all at once. Visuals allow a person to focus just on what is being communicated, rather than having to decipher the tone of voice, eye contact and body language etc.

- Visuals can help people with autism to express their needs – if someone struggles to communicate verbally, visuals can be used to help them tell others what they want and need.

- Visuals can help to increase independence – for example if a person struggles to get themselves dressed in the mornings, try using a visual prompt to help them understand what they need to do.

How can visuals help to reduce challenging behaviour?

- People with autism crave predictability and structure. When there is not enough structure people with autism become anxious. Visuals help to provide this structure and predictability, which reduces anxiety.

- Challenging behaviour can occur when a person with autism cannot express their needs or doesn't understand what is being communicated to them – visuals can help with this.

- Visuals can be used to help people with autism understand how they are meant to behave and what is expected of them.

- Visuals that incorporate a special interest can help to motivate and reinforce the expected behaviour.

Things to consider when using visuals:

- Resources need to be tailored to the individual. Some people with autism will understand symbols and drawings, but people who are more literal may need real life photographs. What works for one person, won't necessarily work for someone else.

- Visuals can take a lot of 'trial and error' – if it doesn't work, you might need to adapt it.

- Try and incorporate the person's special interest where possible – this will help motivate them to want to use it.

- Try and involve the person who the visual resource is for. They are more likely to understand it if they have helped to create it.

- Using visual resources can take a lot of time and patience but don't give up! Sometimes it may take weeks or months to work.

In this series, we will highlight examples of different types of visual resources and how they might be used.