Pointers to Success with Visual Schedules or Agendas
From the POP for Autism

➢ Colour-code the backing for your picsyms; have one colour for "work" tasks, another colour for "choice" tasks.

➢ The "choice" option card is placed in the daily schedule, but it refers to a display of <u>preferred</u> activities that is represented in some other place: a spot on the wall, a book, etc. where all the "choice" activities can be viewed.

➢ It often helps to begin and end each day with a "choice" symbol, and also to have "choice" available right after recess. Placed in the schedule at these times, "choice" provides a motivation for the child to come into the school building, and also helps to end the day on a high note.

➢ Display only as many "choice" items as you know the student can understand; you may begin with no more than two choices displayed at a time, and gradually add additional items as the student demonstrates the ability to select appropriately from three or more options.

➢ It's just fine to vary the choices available at any one point in the day. For example, you will add "choice" items that pertain to outside activities when that is appropriate, but not have those items displayed when the weather is against you.

➢ A preferred fine-motor activity and/or a preferred gross-motor activity should always be made available in the "choice" menu, and a "rest" should also always be available.

➢ "Rest" provides the student with an opportunity to go to a quiet, non-demanding corner or room where sensory and language stimulation and or demands are dramatically reduced. Having a "rest" calms the student sufficiently to increase the likelihood of improved concentration and appropriate behaviour after the rest.

➢ The frequency of the "choice" option within the schedule will vary according to the needs of the student. For some, you will make "choice" available before and after each "work" period. In time, you may be able to have two work periods between "choice". For other students, you can *start* with two "work" periods between "choice", and increase that number, always keeping in mind that "choice" items are also curriculum or necessary learning for the student, and *do need to be scheduled regularly.*

➢ When it seems to be appropriate to the student's needs, offer longer periods of choice, and shorter periods of "work". This option may be valuable when the child is first learning to follow the schedule. It may also be a useful strategy when the student is tired or otherwise having a "bad " day. It is a strategy that can also help many students get through the afternoon successfully. Always limit work demands to be consistent with the student's developmental level, attentional abilities and need for movement.

➢ Always have available, at every point in the day, the option of "Break". Use a token, or a differently colour-coded picsym to indicate the "break" option. "Break" is not like "choice", for "choice" is a scheduled preferred activity, and "break" refers to the option of briefly **stopping** an activity before returning to complete that activity.

➢ At "break" time, the idea is to *stop the task briefly*, but not to change to a different location or different activity. When the student presents the "break" token to you (you will have to teach the child to do that), just let the student stop the current task for a few moments before resuming it. (Some children are helped during that time, by having a squeeze ball, or other small, preferred item available to them as a stress reducer, but this is not a requirement during break.) You will determine the length of "break" based on several factors: the child's developmental level, the difficulty or newness of the task, past demonstrated need, and your assessment or "reading" of the child's immediate needs. When "break" is finished, say, "Break all done; time to work," and return to, or present the required task again.

➤ Always use your judgement about how long to stick with a "work" task. Abbreviate it when you can tell that the student is giving you his or her unique signals that s/he has had enough (even when "breaks" have been made available).

➤ Use some sort of audible signal to indicate transitions between one activity and another. A bell, or repeated words such as, "3, 2, 1, All done", used *consistently* by the adult as each task changes, becomes a automatic signal to the student that it is time to transition to the next event. Automaticity reduces the stress often associated with transitions, and increases the likelihood of rapid compliance.

➤ The addition of a visual stimulus can also be helpful in the transition process. Timers, or 3, 2, 1 countdown strips can be used *in conjunction* with the audible signal to increase the saliency of the transition cues.

➤ It does not matter if visual schedules are displayed horizontally or vertically, or in a daytimer-type book format. Use the method that works in your classroom and that is appropriate to the student's age.

➤ You will want to consider the mobility of your schedule for children who routinely receive instruction in more than one location. The student should always have the schedule **available and visible**.

➤ *Do involve the student* in setting the activity symbols into place each day. Start by teaching the child to add the occasional item, and work toward achieving as much independence as the child can attain in setting his or her schedule.

➤ Some children are not able to make an association between an activity and a pictorial representation of that activity. For these children, we use a miniature or actual size representation of the activity. For example, a miniature toilet, or a toilet paper roll may be used to represent toileting time; a plastic tumbler or spoon can be used to represent eating time. The student may carry the item on the way to the next scheduled activity.

- Some children will have great difficulty moving beyond these object representations to a more abstract representation such as a line-drawing or picsym. However, that link may be taught by consistently pairing a photograph and/or line-drawing with the object that you are using to represent the activity. In time, and over many exposures to this pairing, the student will come to understand the picysm as a reference to the activity.