We know that people learn in different ways and have different strengths. Some people are visual learners. This is often true of students with language difficulties. Visuals can help these students understand, remember and learn from what they hear. Some of our students have difficulty, sometimes great difficulty, expressing themselves orally. Visuals can also help these students communicate important thoughts, needs and feelings. Visuals can serve as a bridge to spoken language and do not interfere with the development of oral communication skills.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY ‘VISUALS’?

Visuals refer to anything we can see. Some examples of visuals are:

- photographs
- concrete objects
- drawings
- natural gestures and signs
- facial expressions
- written words
- specially designed visual supports (e.g., communication books and schedules)

WHY ARE VISUALS A GOOD IDEA? BECAUSE THEY:

- are often not specific to a particular language
- are stable and can be referred to repeatedly
- can usually be easily understood by other people
- usually look like what they represent
- usually require simple motor acts in order to use them
- often require recognition memory rather than recall memory

VISUALS HELP STUDENTS:

- attend to orally presented information
- understand what they hear
- think about information already stated
- remember and focus on key points
- connect what they hear to real life objects and experiences
- organize and break down information
- communicate their thoughts and feelings
- develop literacy skills

Talk to your school Speech-Language Pathologist about specialized software for creating visuals and communication aids (e.g., Boardmaker and Writing with Symbols).
USING VISUALS TO SUPPORT UNDERSTANDING & COMMUNICATING

IDEAS FOR USING VISUALS TO SUPPORT UNDERSTANDING:

- **Classroom rules** - Create visuals representing important rules stated in the positive (e.g., 'we walk', 'we are nice to our friends' and 'we listen'). The teacher draws the students' attention to the rules on a regular basis.

- **Schedules** - Schedules may be individual or may be intended for a whole class. Use the visuals to represent the sequence of daily activities. Schedules can be used to signal a change in the routine and can support transitions from one activity to another.

- **Following directions** - Regular routines and instructions may be represented by visuals and displayed in the location where they are needed. For example, a set of pictures by the cubbies may show: ‘put your bag away’, ‘hang up your coat’, ‘sign your name’ and ‘line up’.

- **Key points** - Write and/or illustrate key points of a discussion or lesson on the blackboard. Review these words, phrases or illustrations at the end of the lesson.

- **Graphic organizers** - Use visuals to provide structure to lessons. For example, during or after a novel study lesson, have students organize their notetaking or other work according to the visually-represented structure (e.g., 'who', 'when', 'where', 'problem', 'plan' and 'result').

IDEAS FOR USING VISUALS TO SUPPORT COMMUNICATING:

- **Requesting** - The student uses visuals to make requests (e.g., 'washroom', 'drink', 'break'). Depending on the student, this may involve the use of pictures, sign language, written words, gestures or even concrete objects.

- **Making choices** - Two or more concrete objects or other visuals are presented to the student so that he/she may indicate a preference (e.g., choice between different snacks, books or activities).

- **Sharing information** - For example, the student brings an 'artifact' (e.g., photograph, object, collage, newspaper clipping) to show classmates when sharing a personal experience. The topic is clear, and a shared point of reference is established.

- **Interacting with peers** - A student might be given sentence strips to allow them to take verbal turns in a card game (e.g., “Do you have any fives?”, “Go fish.”). Another student might be provided with a visual that depicts how to take turns while playing with a classmate.

- **Home-school communication/journaling** - With assistance, the student assembles words and/or pictures depicting key events of the school day. These can be used at home to help the student communicate about things that happened at school (e.g., “What did you do at school today?”). Similarly, parents can help their child prepare visuals depicting interesting events from evenings or weekends to share at school.