# Quick and Easy Adaptations and Accommodations for Early Childhood Students

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## Abstract

Research-based information is used to support the idea of the use of adaptations and accommodations for early childhood students who have varying disabilities. Multiple adaptations and accommodations are outlined. A step-by-step plan is provided on how to make specific adaptations and accommodations to fit the specific needs of early childhood students. Pictures of each adaptation and accommodation are also included. This will allow for better understanding when making these materials. Areas that were researched include: autism, behavior disorders, learning disabilities, sensory needs, communication disorders, developmental disorders, attention deficit disorder, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Outlined are instructions to make visual supports, picture schedules, work systems, behavior modification charts, and picture exchange communication (PECS) books.

## Keywords

As teachers, we know the best ways students with special needs learn is by having adaptations and accommodations that can be used for that specific child, to meet their needs, so they can be successful in the classroom. We also know, as teachers, that we do not have an endless budget that allows us to buy every adaptation and accommodation that we know would benefit our students. This article will outline specific research-based adaptations and accommodations to help students be successful in the early childhood classroom environment; and, will also outline which type of student would most benefit from them. Areas researched include: autism, behavior disorders, learning disabilities, sensory needs, communication disorders, developmental disorders, attention deficit disorder (ADD), and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Finally, the article will present how you could make the adaptations and accommodations instead of purchasing them.

One of the most effective ways to get students to process language is through the use of visual supports. A visual support is a visually perceived stimulus that can assist an individual in comprehending information or demands. In a classroom setting this support could be for direction following, schedules, rules, and understanding instruction. Students who would best be supported through the use of visuals are: children with autism, ADD/ADHD, developmental disabilities, or students with a learning disability. Visual supports can also be used to help decrease behaviors. In one study, a picture schedule was used, as well as, a reward of giving a pretzel upon completion of the task on the schedule. The results showed a decrease in behaviors

**One of the most effective ways to get students to process language is through the use of visual supports.**

and an increase in compliance. After six days of giving the pretzel reinforcer, this was removed, and the schedule was used without rewards (Dooley, Wilczenski, & Torem, 2001).

According to Tissot and Evans (2003), visual supports as photographs, hand-drawn pictures, graphics, or computer-generated icons actually benefit all students especially those who have difficulty reading. Quill (1995) discusses students who need extra assistance with organization, academic and life skills, communication, social interaction, and behavior management could benefit from using visual cues. Students with autism, ADD/ADHD, developmental disabilities, and students with a learning disability all have difficulty with the previously stated tasks. These students can display behavioral issues due to an inability to understand and process verbal language. By placing visual supports in an early childhood classroom setting as part of the instructional program, students who have difficulty with verbal language (students who have autism, ADD/ADHD, developmental disabilities, learning disability, behavioral disability) can have: eased transitions, feeling of empowerment by having visual choices, clearly defined expectations through the use of pictures, longer attention span, reduced anxiety, concepts become more concrete, and the ability to help express his or her thoughts.

Children with autism are visual rather than auditory learners and they prefer picture communication verses written words (Cohen, 1998). When a teacher gives a direction and it is not followed, they may follow up with another verbal direction on top of another. According to Hodgdon (2000), the addition of

verbal communications does not change the fact that the student just doesn't understand it. In fact, when used correctly, visual supports allow students with autism freedom to engage in life, regardless of his or her impairment of communication (Hodgdon, 2000).

Most students need structure in their environment in order to be successful. As teachers, it is our job to do what is best for students and one way to help ensure success is by implementing visuals to structure their environment. One of the first visuals to set up is a daily schedule. This schedule should only include the largest transitions of their day. When the student is at the activity, mini-schedules can then be used to add even more structure. One study completed showed progress in the performance of four students who used a picture schedule to help with independence during playtime. The participants in this study demonstrated an increase in on-task behavior and a decrease in prompting (Morri-

son et al., 2002). Another study also looked at students' participation during free play sessions. These students were given picture cues as well. The results of this study found two students needed less intrusive procedures to engage the child in play sessions and two students needed the entire intervention to reach the goal of engagement in play sessions (Bevill et al., 2001).

Many students who have issues with behavior need schedules in place so they have a clear beginning and ending to the task at hand. Without having a sense of time, students do not know if they will be sitting at circle time for the whole day or can sit only a minute and then can leave. Setting up schedules as well as mini-schedules give students a sense of time as well as predictability. The use of visuals progress students toward the goal of independence. Below you can see a schedule of a student's day and then a mini-schedule of a student's circle time.



The large daily schedule includes the activities (from top to bottom): playground, centers, work time, circle, snack, music, and home. The mini circle time schedule includes (from left to right): the more we get together, leader, weather bear, three songs, home and school, story, journal, and check schedule.
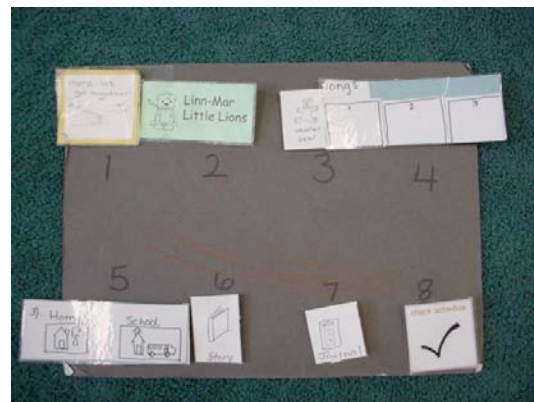


In order to make a schedule you will first need cardboard or matte board. It may be beneficial to purchase a picture program. If you do not have the budget for this, then you can use a digital camera and take pictures – or you can always draw them. A great size for pictures is 2"x 2". Laminate the pictures and then add Velcro to the back. The pictures to

include on the large daily schedule are the large transition times throughout your day. On mini schedules you should include pictures of the small transitions throughout the large activity. Add the opposite Velcro to the tag board. You can hang the schedule horizontally or vertically. If you have a student that is a reader, you could have written words instead of pictures. In this case, you should also hang the schedule horizontally, so they follow from left to right. To make the circle time board, just use a square piece of matte board and attach pictures to represent each activity (in order) of your circle time.

One type of mini-schedule that can be made for students is song cards for circle time. This allows for the students to be able to know which song will be sung. The visual cue is used so they are able to visually process the name of the song instead of processing it auditorally. Here is an example of song cards that have been used:



To make song cards you can draw pictures that represent the songs on white paper. If you are unable to draw, you can use a program such as Boardmaker to make your pictures. You could also use clipart from the internet. Next, color them and write the title of the song on top. To keep them sturdy, use card stock, tag board, or just simply glue white paper onto construction paper. After this laminate them or put contact paper on them. You may add Velcro so you can hang them up.

Many teachers have a leader of the day. It is very difficult for some students with disabilities to have the element of surprise of who will be the leader or they might want to be the leader everyday. This is especially true when you think of students with behavioral issues. One way to alleviate this is to set up the whole week of leaders and post the list in the classroom so the students can visually see it. You can even color coordinate the leader board with your Days-of-the-Week board. Here is an example:

To make these two boards, glue five different colored pieces of construction paper (or you can use colored index cards) to poster board. Write the days of the week across the top of them. Make a second board that looks identical to the first. Cut a smaller piece of the five colors to write the days of the week on them again. Take all of this and laminate it. Place little Velcro squares on one of the weekly boards and use the opposite side to be placed on the back of the smaller days of the week. To make your leader tags, on the computer make a design that says you're the leader. Make multiple copies on card stock. Write your students names on them and then cut them up. For your leader board, just tape up your tags weekly so you can easily remove them and put them on the student.

Another nice visual for circle time is having the same manipulatives the teacher uses at circle but in a smaller version so the student can use them right at circle. The first picture below shows a teacher's circle time board and the second picture shows a student's smaller version of manipulatives. All you need to do for these visuals is make them exactly as above, just in smaller versions. Copy machines work great for shrinking pictures, especially the song cards!





The teacher's circle time board includes a weather bear, the days of the week, the leader board, the weather options, and the three song choices the leader had picked. The student circle time manipulatives includes the weather bear, the days of the week, the songs picked by the leader, and a home and school chart. The teacher does not hang up her home and school chart on the circle time board. Instead, the teacher lays it out on the floor.

In an early childhood education class where a calendar approach is used, visuals can be shrunk down and used the same way as the circle time approach. A calendar can be copied as well as weather graphs. Students can complete the same activities as the teacher by using smaller versions. This can be very helpful for students with ADD/ADHD and behavior issues because their attention span will be maintained much longer than just auditorally processing what is happening during calendar time.

A work system can be used for children with autism, developmental disability, or a learning disability. The point of a work system is for students to work productively and complete assignments independently. Hume's (2004) work has noted:

A work system provides all of the required information without adult

prompting and teaches the student to attend to visual cues (rather than verbal directives) when completing a task. A work system assists in organizing a student with ASD by providing a systematic work routine—working from left-to-right or top-to-bottom. Students do not have to plan where to begin or how to proceed. Work systems can be used with any type of task or activity (e.g., academic, self-help, leisure), across settings (e.g., independent work area, cafeteria, place of employment), and for individuals at all functioning levels (e.g., systems can range from concrete to abstract). (p.5)

The following is a work system for centers.



The picture has a tub of center cards under the word "go" and a tub of finished cards under the word "stop." To make these cards, you need half of a manila file folder. You can either draw right on the folder or glue another piece of paper to it. Establish what child you are making the work system for and their level of abilities. Then draw out directions with the words indicating what can be completed at each center. You can then laminate the center work system folder. Here is a picture of the same center for two different students with varying abilities.
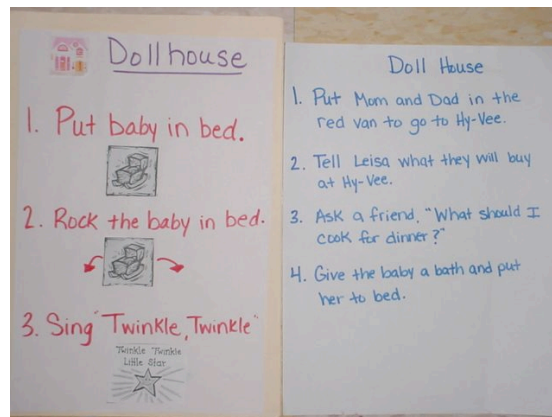
The center work card on the left has a student only completing three steps at the center. Pictures are matched with print because this student is not a reader. The adult reads the directions and the student performs the actions. After a number of trials, the student is able to successfully complete this center work card independently. The center work card on the right is for a student that is able to read. This student has four, more complex steps to complete. The first steps are as follows:

1. Put Mom and Dad in the red van to go to a grocery store.
2. Tell Leisa what they will buy at a grocery store.
3. Ask a friend, "What should I cook for dinner?"
4. Give the baby a bath and put her to bed.

The idea of work systems came from training in Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication and handicapped Children (TEACCH). Massey and Wheeler (2000) completed one study on the use of activity schedules. They found that a child with autism can independently follow activity schedules with success; and, minimal training is needed for them to generalize these skills to other settings (Massey & Wheeler, 2000).

Essentially, if a teacher has a goal for a student to work independently, then setting up a work system is a wonderful choice. A work system is defined by Division TEACCH as a systematic and organized presentation of tasks and materials that visually communicates at least four pieces of information to the student (Schopler, Mesibox, & Hearsey, 1995). The first being the steps the student is supposed to do. Examples: sorting materials, hanging or folding clothes, completing addition problems, etc. The second piece of information is how many steps are there for the student to complete. A visual representation should be given to show how much work is to be done. If a student is to fold or hang 4 articles of clothing, then only provide four articles of clothing. If you would like a student to complete three tasks then have them in three separate trays. The next piece of information in the work system is how the student will know when he or she is finished. The teacher can show this by using a finished box, timer, or other visual cue such as a stop sign. The fourth and final piece of information to be given to the student so they are able to complete work systems independently is what they are to do once they are finished. If a student is using a visual schedule then you can include a check schedule at the end of the task. The teacher could have a picture of the next activity, or a motivator could be given to the student for completing the work system. One way a teacher can think about it is this: a schedule shows the student where to go and a work system shows the student what to do.

A second type of adaptation and accommodation is a behavior modification chart. Students who have difficulty with behaviors can use behavior modification charts to help them understand the desired behavior and the reinforcer they can obtain from completing the behavior asked of them. Behavior modification replaces undesirable behaviors with more desirable ones through positive or negative reinforcement. Behavior modification has been used to successfully treat obsessive-compulsive disorder, ADD/ADHD, and other disorders (Martin, 1988). You can

> **A schedule shows the student where to go and a work system shows the student what to do.**

also use behavior modification charts for students with autism. When using the following suggestions keep in mind that you need to teach the child how to use these first. To do this, you need to make the request simple and short, so the reinforcer can be received often. Once the student understands the concept, then more wait time can be given.

We all have students that request one item or activity; but you, as the teacher, want them to complete something else first. The use of a First/Then chart can be very helpful. To make this chart, you need green and red construction paper. Cut one 3"x 5" green piece and one 3" x 5" red piece. Attach them together at the back with scotch tape, so that the green side will be on the left. With a black marker, write "First" on the green side and "Then" on the red side. The green symbolizes go, meaning do this first. The red symbolizes you are done and now are able to receive the preferred activity or the reinforcer. Also, draw a black line straight down where the green and red pieces meet. This helps establishes stopping one activity before beginning the next. Add one small Velcro piece on the front of both the green and red sides. Velcro on pictures of what you are requesting on the green side and the reinforcer or preferred activity on the red side. Here is an example of what one looks like:



When you would like to teach a student a replacement behavior, the following behavior modification chart is beneficial. Instead of completing one simple task, this chart helps to change a particular behavior. On it, you have a picture of the behavior you want and a picture of the reinforcer. The boxes are the number of times the student needs to complete the correct behavior before they obtain the reinforcement. Each time they complete the desired behavior than can receive a smiley face in a box. When all of the boxes have smiley faces, then the reinforcer is given. If the student performs the undesired task, then tap the picture to show the desired behavior but refrain from using verbal cueing. An example of behavior changes could be standing up at circle time to sitting on their carpet square or hitting peers to giving a high five. Here is an example of what one of these charts looks like:

To make this, use a placemat as the background. Attach Velcro in two opposite corners. On the left piece of Velcro, you will attach a picture of the desired behavior. On the right piece of Velcro you will attach a picture of the reinforcer. Draw an arrow from the picture of the behavior that is wanted to the picture of the reinforcer. At the bottom, attach three pieces of Velcro. Three small circles can be cut out of construction paper. Draw smiley faces on them. Next, laminate them and attach Velcro. Each time the student completes the desired behavior, they receive a smiley face. Once they have earned all three smiley faces, they can receive the reinforcer. Take the smiley faces off and start it all over again. At the beginning, you may be giving out a smiley face every 10-15 seconds. As time goes on, you can give a smiley out less frequently.

Some students with disabilities have difficulty communicating their wants and needs. This can be due to the inability to talk, poor articulation that is not understandable, or inability to word find. The students who most commonly have these problems are children with autism or developmental disorders. One way to help them to communicate with the world around them is by using a Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS). Training in how to run PECS is highly recommended when working with students who are unable to communicate (Frost & Bondy, 2002).

The idea behind PECS is for the students to have a book of their own that they are able to access independently. This book has visuals in it of items the student may need or want to request. Examples are of food items or toy items. The student is able to open the book and find the item to request. Once they find it then they put it on the front of the book where the sentence strip is. They are then able to make a sentence. An example is, "I want crackers." After they formulate their sentence, they remove the whole sentence strip and then hand it to an adult. As

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**Internet Resources**
*Free pictures to print*
  http://www.dotolearn.com

  http://pdictionary.com

  http://www.usevisualstrategies.com

  http://trainland.tripod.com/pecs.htm
  (At the bottom of this website is over sixty pages of free PECS pictures.)

*Free behavior modification charts to print*
  http://www.ed.utah.edu/~hawken_l/BEPresource.htm

  http://www.latitudes.org/behavioral_charts.html

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stated before, it is highly recommended to receive training in PECS in order to facilitate the teaching properly.

One research study on PECS "demonstrated the efficacy of the PECS protocol with 3 children with autism, the emergence of speech, and the collateral gains in social-communicative behaviors and concomitant decreases in problem behavior" (Charlop-Christy et al., 2002). This study showed that PECS can be taught in a short amount of time to children with autism. These children can improve their use of communication by using pictures to express their wants and needs to others. This also resulted in decreased challenging behaviors because they were able to communicate more effectively.

The PECS CD of pictures can be purchased from their website at www.pecs.com for only $35. These pictures can be used for not only their PECS books but for all of the other picture visuals that have been discussed throughout this article. PECS books can also be purchased commercially. In addition, Mayer Johnson sells a number of software and resources for visuals.

To make a PECS book, all you need to do is find inexpensive plastic binders. Cut the front of the binder smaller to allow for the sentence strip on the back page. Attach Velcro strips on the front of the book. Pages can be placed inside the book for the student to obtain the visual they need independently. As for the pages in the PECS book, use inexpensive vinyl placemats that can be found at a dollar store. They are very durable and Velcro can easily be removed from them to add new strips if needed. Add Velcro to a rectangular cut placemat for the sentence strip, on the front and the back. Place the opposite Velcro on the back inside cover, where the sentence strip will go. Here is a picture of a PECS book made for around five dollars.

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**Appendix: Materials List**

| **Song Cards** | **Circle Time Manipulatives** |
| --- | --- |
| Colored Sharpie Markers | Tag Board |
| Card Stock | Velcro |
| Laminate | Copy Machine |
| Velcro | Construction Paper |
| Scissors | Markers for Weather Bear |
| | Laminate |
| | Scissors |

| **Days of the Week/Leader Board** | **Work System** |
| --- | --- |
| Poster Board | File Folder |
| Construction Paper | Markers |
| Black Marker | Glue |
| Laminate | Scissors |
| Velcro | |
| Scissors | |

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**Appendix (continued): Materials List**

<u>**Schedules**</u>

Tag Board

Laminated Schedule Pictures

Laminate

Velcro

Scissors

<u>**Behavior Modification Chart**</u>

Placemat

Velcro

Laminated Picture Cards

Construction Paper

Laminate

Velcro

Black Marker

Scissors

<u>**First/Then**</u>

Green and Red Construction Paper

Black Marker

Laminate

Velcro

Laminated Picture Cards

Scissors

<u>**PECS Book**</u>

Plastic Binder

Laminated Picture Cards

Velcro

Placemats

Scissors