



## Discovering the Possibilities with Visual Strategies:

A Training Day with Linda Hodgdon, M. Ed., CCC-SLP Communication Specialist.

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Linda Hodgdon is a Communication Specialist from Detroit, Michigan. She works with students who have communication difficulties, many of whom have been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). Linda is renowned worldwide for her accomplishments and contributions in the development and use of *Visual Strategies* and the effectiveness of using these with children who do not respond well to spoken language alone, especially as a means of facilitating a higher level of understanding for both the child and their communication partner, e.g. teacher, parent, peer.

Linda's lecture was organised by the *Autism Noticeboard* and was held at the Waterview Convention Centre in Sydney's leafy Bicentennial Park. While most attendees were Speech Pathologists and teachers, some psychologists, parents and an Occupational Therapist also attended. I think most would agree with me when I say it was an exceptionally worthwhile and stimulating training day. This article intends to give readers a flavour of what Linda covered and where they can find out more about the *Visual Strategies* concept and some of the available resources online and in printed form.

**“Autism and other communication disorders have not changed – the technology has, and you still need to know how to use this new technology and understand what it is supposed to achieve”**

Linda firstly introduced us to the *Visual Strategies* concept and its application with a special focus on the school context. Here, she noted the importance of acknowledging the individual differences in skill levels among children with ASD. She said, “the concept of using visual strategies will be consistent, but the implementation will reflect differences to match the individual's needs and abilities”. Here she

emphasised the power of observation as an important aspect of an “informal assessment” approach, rather than only relying on formal assessment tools often used out of context.

Secondly, Linda drew our attention to the student's communication partner and the fact that the student is only ½ of the communication interaction. She dispelled the often-heard comment “He/she understands EVERYTHING I say”, by asserting that there can be many reasons why a student understands apart from, or instead of, verbal communication, e.g. gestures/body language, printed material, signs, pictures, etc. Linda described that the most common errors made by a student's communication partner included:

- Overestimating level of overall functioning from performance of splinter skills
- Assuming understanding because the student can perform familiar routines
- Appearance of higher level of linguistic ability due to echolalia

Thirdly, Linda spoke about the use of *Visual Strategies* as a means of facilitating the process towards positive behaviour change in students with behaviour problems including the teaching of social skills, coping skills for dealing with transitions and establishing visual routines and activity schedules.

The importance of communication partners being able to self-reflect and be mindful about the variables that they bring to the interaction with their students was emphasised, e.g. where on the continuum from *relaxed* to *strict* they are in their interaction style, or how past experiences affect their ability respond sensitively to a child's needs.

Finally, Linda provided some samples and examples of *Visual Strategies* for improving communication including the use of new technology, such as the iPhone and iPod Touch and FLIP, a new generation digital camera. Linda provided a live demonstration of its use and showed how easily and quickly the recorded images could be transferred to the computer screen. The take away message from this segment of the training was that “autism and other communication disorders have not changed – the technology has, and you still need to know how to use this new technology and understand what it is supposed to

achieve”. In other words, investigate and test (whenever possible) before purchasing product.

Linda is the author of two excellent books on the use of visual strategies titled:

- Solving Behaviour Problems in Autism: Improving Communication with Visual Strategies
- Visual Strategies for Improving Communication: Practical Suggestions for School and Home

For more information about Linda and resources visit [www.lindahodgdon.com](http://www.lindahodgdon.com).

*Anders is a Senior Clinical Consultant with the Statewide Behaviour Intervention Service, which is part of the Office of the Senior Practitioner, ADHC, NSW Department of Family and Community Services.* ●



On Linda's website you will find a link to Linda's online newsletter;

*Another View: Effective Solutions for Autism, Aspergers and More..*

You can subscribe online to keep up with her visual strategies journey along with book and product reviews.