

# Visual Supports: Visual Timers

## What are visual timers?

**Visual timers** help make the abstract concept of time more concrete by showing the passage of time visually. They use pictures, colors, symbols, or numbers to show how much time is left in an activity (Rutherford et al., 2020).

## Why use a visual timer?

- They help create routines when used for tasks like brushing teeth or cleaning up.
- They help with transitions by showing when to move from one activity to another.
- They build time management skills.

## Examples of visual timers

- **Hourglass timers** have sand that flows from one chamber to another. When the sand runs out, time is up.
- **Countdown clocks** are digital timers that count down from a set time and have numbers or colors that disappear as time passes.
- **Picture timers** use pictures or symbols instead of numbers to show time passing.
- **Visual timer** apps for tablets or phones can be downloaded by searching for “visual timer.”



## How do I use a visual timer?

### Choose the right visual timer

Choose a timer that matches the person’s age and understanding of colors, shapes, pictures, and numbers.

### Explain how it works

Show the timer and use clear, simple words to explain how it will help the person know when an activity ends.

### Set clear expectations

Tell the person what is expected of them while the timer runs. For example, if the timer is used for cleaning up, tell them that they need to clean up until the timer goes off.

### Start small

Begin with shorter amounts of time so the person can learn how to use the timer. When the person successfully uses the timer, increase the amount of time.

### Be consistent

Make visual timers a regular part of the person’s routine. The more they are used, the more effective they become.

### Reinforce

Use positive reinforcement, such as praise, when the person properly uses the timer.

### Be flexible

A timer should not be punitive. It should be used to teach self-management skills. Adjust based on their needs.

### Teach independence

Over time, teach the person how to set and manage their own timer.

**Additional resource guides at <https://www.delawareautismnetwork.org/>.**

**Reference:** Rutherford, M., Baxter, J., Grayson, Z., Johnston, L., & O’Hare, A. (2020). Visual supports at home and in the community for individuals with autism spectrum disorders: A scoping review. *Autism: The International Journal of Research and Practice*, 24(2), 447–469. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361319871756>

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