

What's next?

Imagine that your tomorrow is now a total mystery. Suddenly you have no idea what might happen beyond today. You could be set to do exactly the same thing as you are currently, but then again you could be going to the funfair or heading off to sit in the dentist's chair.

How would you feel if you had to get by without access to a diary or calendar? Planning systems help us to think ahead and sort out our schedules. We write down future appointments so we don't miss them. We look to the weeks ahead and know if we need to organise childcare, pay a bill, send a birthday card or go to the dentist. Planned activities don't pop up unexpectedly, because we have seen them on our calendar.

Children may not understand our scribbles on the calendar, but it can still be important for them to plan beyond today. Access to information gives children a greater sense of control. They may be able to communicate and conquer fears that might not otherwise be addressed before a dreaded day arrives. We can plan ahead, putting systems such as social stories (see thegraycenter.org/social-stories for more information) in place to support and set the child up to succeed.

We're all familiar with advent calendars, one of the child-friendly, visual systems that have been created to help count down to Christmas. Children understand that each time they open a door the big day gets closer, long before they can count or read. Similarly, we can create our own child-friendly visual calendars and use pictures to highlight important events or future changes to our routines. By doing this we respect children's need to know and prepare them for future change.

CASE STUDY

Danny's calendar countdowns (Age 5, Diagnosis: Asperger's Syndrome)

Danny was fascinated by calendars, diaries and schedules, and would ask staff repeatedly about upcoming events. He didn't only need to know, but seemed to need to hear it over and over again. His repetitive asking was becoming distracting and we needed to find a way to show Danny what was going to happen in advance without the constant need to talk it through with him.

Our solution was to create a large

Showing children what it is planned will happen tomorrow, next week and beyond can help to reduce their anxieties, says **Adele Devine...**



RESOURCE TROLLEY



Haylee's Friends

Charity Scope's first children's eBook has just gone live on Amazon. *Haylee's Friends* is a story

about a little girl with cerebral palsy. It was written and produced with a mum who has a young girl with cerebral palsy, and her occupational therapist. The story was written to help other young children understand how different equipment and available supports can help to improve every day activities. Visit scope.org.uk/haylees-friends

laminated version of the calendar on the wall with enough space on each day to draw a little visual that Danny could understand without reading. If we planned an outing that was weather dependent, we would split the calendar square in two; one side would show sunshine and a visual of the park, the other would show a rain cloud and books representing the library.

As the month progressed we would tick off the days, and Danny was able to use the calendar to count down. When he interrupted story time to ask about what was going to happen on Friday, staff could suggest he had a look at the calendar. What had begun as a genuine need to know had also become a way to disrupt and gain attention. The calendar allowed us to give him the information he wanted without redirecting our attention from the other children.

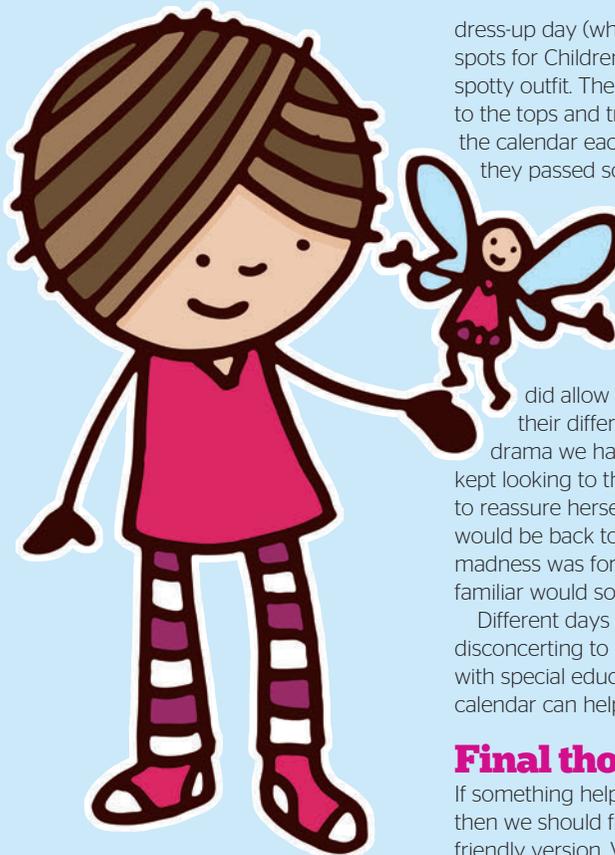
This system was so successful that Danny's mum started to use it with him at home. She put a large calendar on the wall in their downstairs toilet and found that Danny was using it to count down to special dates, which allowed him to voice concerns and fears ahead of time. This seemed to help avoid some of his unpredictable meltdowns, as they became less frequent.

Adapting the calendar so that Danny could understand was a small change, but one that made a huge amount of difference at home and school.

CASE STUDY

Ginny's dress up day distress (Age 5, Diagnosis: Autism)

Ginny had a history of anxiety associated with dress-up days. She absolutely refused to wear 'different' clothes. Ginny liked to wear



the same pink T-shirt and tracksuit bottoms every day. When Ginny's mum tried to convince her to wear a spotty T-shirt or pyjamas to school instead, she knew before she began that there was no chance of success. The issue, however, was that when Ginny got to school she couldn't cope with seeing other children dressed 'wrong' either. She would try to remove the offensive clothes by force to make things right, which could cause the other children distress.

The school insisted on having charity dress-up days and most children seemed to enjoy them. Ginny did not have to dress up, but she did need to learn to deal with others doing so. We added visual images to the class calendar of a stick person wearing coloured tops and blue trousers. On the

dress-up day (which in this instance was spots for Children in Need day) we showed a spotty outfit. The following days were back to the tops and trousers. We talked through the calendar each day and ticked off days as they passed so Ginny could see the dress-up day getting closer.

Finally, the day arrived. Ginny came to school in her usual pink 'uniform'. She had a spotty T-shirt in her bag and point blank refused to change, but she did allow the other children to wear their different clothes without the drama we had come to expect. Ginny kept looking to the calendar during the day to reassure herself that tomorrow things would be back to normal. This spotty madness was for one day only, and the familiar would soon return!

Different days can be extremely disconcerting to children, particularly those with special educational needs, but a calendar can help explain and reassure.

Final thoughts

If something helps us to get by as adults then we should find a way to create a child-friendly version. Visual calendars can help children plan ahead and mentally prepare. They can also prompt a 'discussion' and help alleviate some of the anxieties associated with 'different' days.



about the author

Adele Devine is a teacher at Portesbery School for Children with Severe Learning Difficulties and director of the award-winning SEN Assist Ltd. Visit senassist.com

10 TOP VISUAL CALENDAR TIPS

SIMPLE IDEAS TO HELP YOUR CHILDREN PREPARE FOR ANYTHING...

- 1 Display the visual calendar somewhere prominent, so that it can be seen at all times.
- 2 Draw simple stick figures so children who do not yet read can understand upcoming events.
- 3 Tick off the days as they pass.
- 4 Split days with a line and show both options if activities are weather dependent.
- 5 Talk through future events regularly so that children can make sense of the visual.
- 6 Show that things can change last minute even if they are on the calendar.
- 7 Model the correct reaction when you have to change plans.
- 8 Use social stories to break down and explain events and expectations.
- 9 Give a copy of the monthly calendar to a child's parents or carers.
- 10 Encourage the use of a visual calendar at home if it helps at nursery.