

# Structured Work Systems



Using Structured Work Systems helps to build independence. This desire for independence is certainly present in children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). Reaching the maximum level of independence, however, can prove more difficult. The goal of independence is a priority for all children, yet when working with children with ASD, independence is the key to successful community inclusion and future employment.

Establishing independence as a goal is vital, and students with autism may face several unique challenges when learning. Individuals with ASD may have difficulty with organization. This can produce a challenge of understanding the demands and carrying forth a plan. Collection everything they need to complete a task is also difficult. Individuals with ASD may also be distractible, and have difficulty with visual and auditory demands. Individuals with ASD may also have difficulty sequencing, knowing what “comes next”. They often have difficulty with generalizing a task from one environment to another. They also may have difficulty initiating and following through a task independently. They often wait for others to give them a prompt to start or work on a task.

A work system is a strategy that addresses independence as an essential outcome for students with ASD. A work system, an element of structured teaching, 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:

1. **The tasks/steps the student is supposed to do.** What is the nature of the task? Does it involve sorting by shape, writing an address, making popcorn, or recycling cans?
2. **The number of tasks/steps there are to be completed.** Visually represent how much work is to be done. If a student is to cut 10 coupons, give only 10 coupons so he/she can visualize completion. Steps may be represented by more abstract cues such as numbers, shapes, poker chips, or pictures of high interest items, such as Thomas the Train cars.
3. **How the student knows he/she is finished.** The student should independently recognize the end of the activity through the structure within the task, use of a finished box, timer, or other visual cue such as a stop sign.
4. **What to do when he/she is finished.** Indicate next scheduled activity. May need to use a highly desired item/activity to increase motivation, though often being “finished” is motivating enough. Work systems highlight important information and help limit distractions.

## Advantages of using a work system:

- Work systems offer an external organization tool for individuals with ASD who may have trouble organizing materials.
- Work systems offer a clear and predictable sequence of activities to complete. Such predictability decreases the anxiety and uncertainty many individuals with ASD feel when confronted with unknown tasks or activities.
- Work systems limit the need for verbal instructions.
- When the individual becomes accustomed to the process, work systems limit the need for constant adult support and prompting and, therefore, promote independence.

- Once an individual has learned how to use a work system, the system can be used across environments to promote generalization of skills.

### **Tips for implementing a structured work system.**

- Use clear shoe boxes with materials in the box. Use a visual task analysis, if needed, to help the child follow the steps needed to complete the task. Closing the lid and moving the box, or placing a “finished” card on the box, shows that he/she is finished with that task and is ready to move to the next box.
- Provide only the materials the student will need for the specific task/activity to decrease confusion.
- Vary activities and levels of difficulty. If using, say, 3 boxes, allow the middle or last box to be a familiar and/or “fun” activity.
- Gradually increase the difficulty of the task by adding small changes. For example, if they are matching colors, add just one more once the skill is mastered.
- Use work systems in a variety of settings (e.g., circle time, social groups, playground, home, doctor visits) to increase generalization across location and adults.
- Teach the work system with minimally invasive prompts so the adult/prompts do not become part of the work routine (e.g., prompt nonverbally, direct students to visual cues, prompt from behind so adult is not part of the student’s visual field, fade prompts as quickly as possible to maximize independence). You may also use a short verbal prompt like “one, two, three....GO” or gesture to the reward they will receive, when there is resistance to initiating the task.
- Create smaller, more portable work systems (e.g. in a notebook, file box) for students who travel to different settings throughout the school day.
- Incorporate student’s interests in the visual cues used in the works system (e.g., students can match pictures of SpongeBob or Spiderman on their work system).
- Have work systems completed and ready to use when the student starts to work. Consider setting up numerous task boxes or work systems that can be used by numerous students.
- Create a visual of the “reward” that can be earned when the tasks are completed.

### **Some Examples of Structured Work Systems**



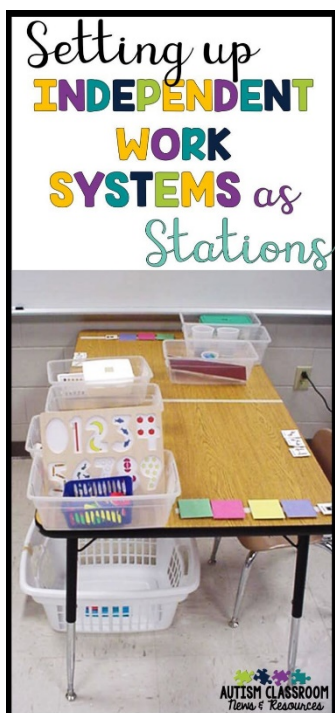


## How to Design a Structured Work System

- Set up a visual system to show students how much work is to be completed
- Make the visuals age appropriate
- Visuals can be left to right or top to bottom







## Structured Work System Examples







