

Picture That: Understanding Language Through Visualization

By **Karen Kaplan, MS**

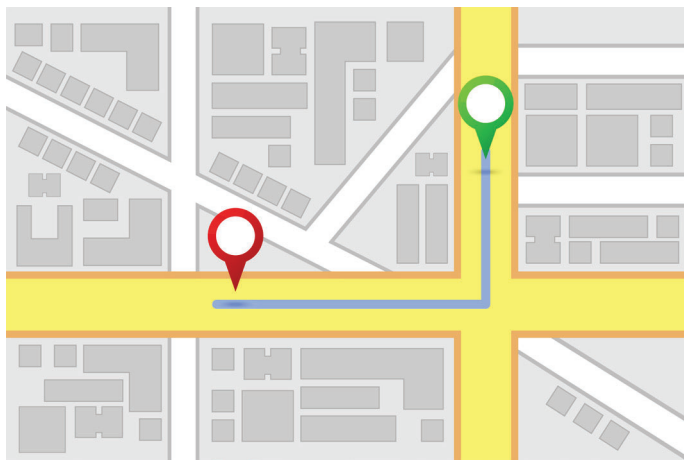


“Words are like a second language,” said Dr. Temple Grandin, an inventor, author, speaker, and woman who lives each day on the autism spectrum. Temple has shared the challenges she experienced understanding the words used by others, explaining that she learned their meaning through connecting their “pictures” to each other.

In her opinion, nouns and verbs were easy, but spatial words like “over” and “under” were harder to visualize. Also, adverbs presented a challenge, and of course, words like “it,” “of,” and “the.” Who can envision those as images? She also confirmed in her book, [*Thinking in Pictures, Expanded Edition: My Life with Autism*](#), how imagining social and emotional words and phrases, like “getting along with others,” was a challenge.

Over time, she built a vast library of images in her head and learned to form a variety of categories of words to understand conversation and concepts.

So, picture this. You are giving directions to your child, student, or individual, or you are asking them a question or reading them a story, and they stare off, look confused, and do not respond as quickly as anticipated. Have you considered the possibility they are trying to visualize the words you have said to follow through or connect them? Well, this might stem from their inability to picture what you are saying.



Here are some activities you might do to support a visual learner and help them expand their understanding and knowledge:

- Teach them how to put puzzles together. Begin with their favorite topics and categories, gradually expanding to others. Let them see how images come together.
- Read big picture books to them. Find books with photographs first, then progress to drawings. Read a page and ask them to tell you what they saw in the words you read to them.
- Teach them to draw and follow maps. Try a map of their room, home, neighborhood, and city.
- Teach them to use a camera or a smartphone to take pictures of flowers, windows, doors, animals, vehicles, houses, waterfalls, grocery stores, etc.



- Teach them concepts through social stories, as detailed in [The New Social Story Book, Revised and Expanded 15th Anniversary Edition](#).
- Play games that support matching.
- Watch videos and films on subjects of interest, so they can see the subject while listening to the words about it.
- Watch documentaries about nature, distant locales, and specific topics. Help them merge sight with sound.
- Teach them to color, use paints, crayons, or colored pencils to draw what they see.
- Teach them verbs by playing games like Simon Says.
- Play word-oriented games, like [Heads Up!](#) or [Name That Word!](#).



Karen Kaplan, MS, is a native San Franciscan. She completed her bachelor's and master's degrees at Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona, in speech pathology and audiology. She minored in special education and obtained her speech therapist and special education credentials in California. Karen worked as a speech therapist for schools for 20 years before opening her own residential and education program for students with autism. She worked in credential programs at Sacramento State University as well as UC Davis and spent 20 years directing private schools for those with autism and similar learning challenges.

Karen founded a non-profit, Offerings, which helps cultures globally to understand those with developmental challenges. For seven years, she founded and facilitated an autism lecture series and resource fair in Northern California. Karen still facilitates an annual Autism Awesomeness event. She is currently consulting and helping families, schools, and centers for children, teens, and adults. Karen has authored three books: [Reach Me Teach Me: A Public School Program for the Autistic Child; A Handbook for Teachers and Administrators](#), [On the Yellow Brick Road: My Search for Home and Hope for the Child with Autism](#), and [Typewriting to Heaven...and Back: Conversations with My Dad on Death, Afterlife and Living](#) (which is not about autism but about having important conversations with those we love).

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