

## Daily Routines

Most children do well with a daily schedule or routine that they can predict. Children with autism do exceptionally well with a daily routine because it makes their day to day experiences more predictable and provides them with a sense of control over their environment. New situations and changes to a daily schedule can be stressful for children with autism and having structure around their day helps eliminate some of this stress. You can create a routine for just about anything your child does on a regular basis. Having predictable morning and evening routines give a child a positive start and end to their day.

### Visual Schedules

One of the most useful tools for establishing routines are **visual schedules**. Visual schedules are written or pictorial schedules that will tell a child what activities will occur during the day and the order in which they will occur. A **written schedule** is appropriate for children who can read. For example, every step of the morning would be clearly listed out in the schedule, so the child knows exactly what to expect. There should be a reinforcer at the end of the schedule. A **reinforcer** is anything that will motivate the child to complete her morning schedule. Having a schedule like this increases independence and reduces the need for constant prompting.

A pictorial visual schedule uses pictures to represent each step of a process -- say washing your hands. This type of visual schedule is very useful for younger children, or children who do not read.

### Creating Your Child's Routine

You can create a routine for your child by following these steps:

1. Identify a portion of your child's day that you would like to create a routine for. This could be a morning, afternoon or evening routine, or any other part of the day that you want them to have structure around.
2. Write down each step in the child's routine, keeping in mind that there are many small details that make up a particular activity. For example, getting dressed in the morning, involves smaller steps such as brushing your hair and taking your clothes out of the closet.
3. Think about the best visual schedule to create for your child. Ask yourself -- is this something that they need to carry with them? Are they able to read? Would a pictorial representation be easier for them to follow?
4. Create the visual schedule using pictures, icons, and words etc. You can then place it somewhere

where your child will be able to look at it frequently.

5. Identify a reinforcer for your child. This could be anything such as a snack or access to a toy or an activity.
6. When you are ready to introduce the routine to your child, introduce it by using the same verbal directions each time. For example, you could say, "It is time to get ready for school, Adrian."
7. Remind them that they will get access to the reinforcer at the end of the routine by saying something like "First get ready, then you can play with your cars."
8. Prompt the child as little as possible, as they try and follow the steps in their routine. This encourages independence.
9. Once they have completed the routine, reward them with the chosen reinforcer. In this example, you would give Adrian access to his cars.

While setting up a routine takes a bit of time and practice, once it is established, it provides a great deal of structure and security for a child with autism. Of course, there will be times when things won't go as expected.

### What to do if you need to change a routine

There are many everyday situations where you may need to change a child's daily routine. A visitor, an unexpected trip to the doctor or to the grocery store, a family holiday meal; all of these changes can upset a child with autism. There are a few things you can do to prepare your child for unexpected changes. The first is to have a visual symbol for change. You can use a card with a question mark, or the word "change" and show it to your child before the change occurs. This will help them prepare for a change and expect that something different is about to happen.

You can also explain what to expect by creating a story about the upcoming change. Include a step-by-step explanation of what your child will experience. This will give them an opportunity to hear about what is going to happen and feel positive about the change. As much as possible, you should also allow your child time to get used to the idea that something different is about to happen, rather than allow the change to happen without warning.

We hope you have found this information useful. You can talk to your child's therapist about creating a routine that will work well for your child, and ask them for resources for creating visual schedules.