

Using an Activity Schedule to Help Your Child Be More Independent



Staying home because of the coronavirus probably means that your child does not have the same level of routine and structure usually provided by school and other programs or activities. With so much down time, it can be hard to keep your child engaged, especially while tending to other responsibilities such as work, household tasks, and self-care. Activity schedules are a tool that might help.

This resource provides an overview and suggestions for how you might create and use an activity schedule to help your child be more independent.

An **activity schedule** is a type of visual schedule that uses symbols, pictures, or words to show the order of activities in a given time.



The types of activities and tasks in an activity schedule vary depending on the child's needs and abilities but are always things the child has already learned and can usually do without any help. However, the level of independence with an activity schedule depends on age, development, etc. In the beginning, your child may participate in the schedule with an adult, if needed. In a sense, an activity schedule is like a day planner or to-do list. It organizes activities in the order they are to be done and tells the child what is currently happening, what is coming up next, and when they are done.

There is lots of published scientific research that has shown activity schedules to be effective for helping children of all ages learn to complete activities independently. The benefits of activity schedules for learners with ASD and other neurodevelopmental challenges include:

- increasing on-task behaviour,
- decreasing problem behaviour,
- easing transitions between activities,
- building independence, and
- improving self-management.



Activity schedules are often used at school to help build independence but they can be used almost anywhere, including at home, and can be easy and cost effective to make.

You might consider making an activity schedule for your child if problem behaviour seems to be getting worse day by day; for example, your child needs to be constantly supervised or entertained, does not have the skills to play on their own, or only engages with electronic devices (TV, tablets, computers, etc.). An activity schedule can also be useful if you need to divert your attention to other children or other tasks.

Your child is ready for an activity schedule if they can:

- ✓ match objects or pictures,
- ✓ do some simple or brief tasks and activities without help from others or with minimal help from others,
- ✓ use hands and fingers to manage items, and
- ✓ will allow someone to physically guide them to do a task.

Making an Activity Schedule

There are 6 steps in planning and making an activity schedule.

1. Decide When to Use Activity Schedule

First decide when during the day you would like your child to use the activity schedule. It might help to start with the part of the day when it is most difficult to keep your child engaged. When your child has learned to follow the activity schedule without help from someone else, you may then want to extend the use of the activity schedule for different times during the day and for different types of activities.

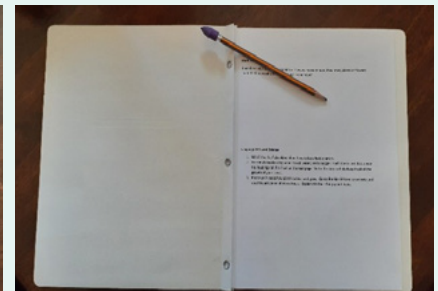


2. Choose Activities and Tasks

Decide what activities your child can and will do as part of the activity schedule. The types of activities are based on your child's needs and abilities. Activities should include things your child already knows how to do without help from someone else. Any activity that has a clear beginning and end can be included in an activity schedule.

An activity schedule should include a variety of activities your child enjoys mixed with some that are less preferred. It is okay to give your child some choice about the activities that are included. Be sure to rotate tasks to prevent boredom. You do not want the activity schedule to be overwhelming. It is better to start with 2 or 3 activities and then add more as your child is better able to complete the activity schedule independently.

Many different types of activities can be included in a schedule. You can include school tasks (like reading, writing, and math) and leisure activities (like colouring, painting, and playing with play dough). **Remember, the activities in the schedule must be things your child can already do without help from others.** You can help increase your child's motivation by using pictures of characters, animals or other favourite objects as part of the materials. You can use objects and materials you already have on hand to create tasks.



Use what you have on hand.

- ✓ Make puzzles by cutting out photos or pictures.
- ✓ Create your own letters with construction paper or by cutting out letters from empty cereal boxes.
- ✓ Use cardboard to make your own dishes or use paper plates.
- ✓ Take pasta or cereal and thread it on a rope or string.



Preparing tasks for an activity schedule can be a great way to reuse, reduce and recycle materials at you have at home. If you run out of ideas, look around and ask yourself: How can the following materials be used for a stand-alone task?

Some other tasks to consider include chores such as folding laundry, feeding pets, setting the table, exercise, arts and crafts, and playing with toys (such as assembling toys like blocks).

It is important to vary the activities so that the program does not become monotonous for your child. As your child learns how to do new tasks, try placing those in the schedule. Be sure to mix tasks your child likes with tasks that are less preferred but that your child will do on their own.

3. Decide How to Display the Schedule

Create a visual display that shows each step or activity to be done. The schedule can be made using objects that represent the tasks, symbols, pictures, or words. It can be drawn on a dry erase board or on paper and arranged so that one activity or multiple activities shows at a time. The schedule can be arranged top to bottom or left to right. The way you display the activity schedule must be workable for you and your child. You need to be able to put the display together quickly and easily. Your child needs to understand what needs to be done, in what order, and what to do when they finish.



Daily
Up by 8:30
Breakfast, dressed, teeth, hair, face by 9:00
60 minutes learning activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Math• Music• Art• Writing• Projects• Cooking/baking
30 minutes reading
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 15 minutes French• 15 minutes English
30 minutes physical activity/time outdoors
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Walking• Biking• Dance• Yoga• Etc.
Daily Chore
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Laundry• Dishes• Sweep/vacuum• Dust• Clean room



4. Choose the Number of Activities and Rewards

Decide how many activities to include and what rewards you can build in to the end of the activity schedule. It is better to start with a smaller number of activities and add more as your child gets better at using the activity schedule independently. By gradually increasing the number of activities, you are gradually increasing your child's ability to work and play on their own.

Your child will learn that he or she can do work on his or her own without needing your assistance and you can take advantage of this time to do your own tasks or to have some time for yourself.

One way to help motivate your child is to include a reward as the final activity or item in the schedule. The reward can be a more open-ended activity like using electronics, playing a game with someone else, or having a snack or treat. Including the reward at the end makes it more likely that your child will complete the activity schedule willingly.

5. Prepare and Organize

Prepare the visual schedule, organize the activities, and decide on the space where the activity schedule can be completed. The visual schedule and materials should be near where your child will do the activities. Materials can be placed on a shelf, in baggies, or in baskets. Organize the activities to meet your child's needs and how it best works in the space you have.



6. Teach Your Child to Follow the Activity Schedule

With the planning and preparation completed, it is time to teach your child to follow the schedule.

Implementing Your Activity Schedule

1. Give the Instruction to Start

When it's time for your child to do the activity schedule, your first step is to give a simple instruction. For example, you might say, "It's time to do your baskets", "Do your independent tasks" or "Let's follow the pictures." Adapt the instruction to your child's level of understanding. You can simply say "Baskets" or "Tasks" if your child has a more limited level of understanding. To help ensure your child does not become dependent on you to finish the activity schedule, do not give any more verbal instructions after telling them to start.

2. Step Behind Your Child

As soon as you give the instruction to start the schedule, step behind your child. Your child will likely need assistance to learn how to use it independently and this assistance is provided from behind. This allows you to provide physical assistance without the child seeing you and prevents them from making eye contact. Stepping behind also helps your child to focus on the task and not on you. When you encourage your child, you also do it from behind.

3. Provide Assistance

The goal is to provide only the amount of assistance necessary for your child to complete the schedule correctly. Physical assistance is important because it increases the likelihood that your child will correctly do what is being asked.

4. Reduce Assistance Quickly

The best approach is to offer more help at the beginning and reduce the level of assistance as quickly as possible while ensuring your child continues to meet expectations. The best way to fade out the amount of physical assistance you provide is to use full physical support, also known as hand-over-hand teaching, followed by a lesser amount of physical assistance, and finally gestures. Remember to always assist while standing behind your child.

Physical Assistance

It can be helpful to understand what physical assistance looks like before you try it with your child.

Full Physical Assistance

When using physical assistance, you are using your body to guide your child's body through the task. This may mean you put your hands on your child's hands to physically guide them to perform the task. For example, if you want your child to get materials out of a basket, place your hand over your child's hand and lead their hand to the basket. Try to use your child's hand to grasp the materials, not yours, so it is your child who pulls the materials out of the basket. By doing this, your child will have a better understanding of what they need to do, which will help develop independence.

You can also use physical prompting when you need to direct your child from one place to another. For example, if you need your child to move from the basket to the work table, remain behind them, place your hands on each side of their body and guide your child to the desired location.

Partial Physical Assistance

Partial physical assistance occurs when you guide rather than take control. So, instead of placing your hand on your child's hand and directing it towards the activity basket, for example, you might guide his hand by gently pushing his wrist towards the basket.

Gestures

Gestural assistance is just what it sounds like - using gestures, such as pointing, to indicate what your child should do. Going back to the example of taking materials from the basket, you would simply point to the basket to encourage your child to take the needed materials.



Full Physical Assistance



Partial Physical Assistance



Gestures

Steps for Your Child to Complete an Activity Schedule

When your child is doing the activity schedule, they must:

1. Check the activity display when given the instruction to start.
2. Get the first task shown on the schedule.
3. Prepare and complete the first task.
4. Place the completed task in the spot designated for completed tasks. This might be an “All - - -Done” or “Finished” box or putting things back where they came from.
5. Repeat steps 2 – 4 for the other tasks shown on the schedule.



Some Final Thoughts

Start with just one or two activities and expand slowly to help your child gain confidence. Be sure the activities you include in the activity schedule are meaningful – it should not be just busy work. Try to find activities that your child enjoys, help build independence, and contribute to the household.

End the activity schedule with a reward. Ending with an enjoyable activity or snack gives your child something to work for. Make a list of rewards that your child may find motivating. If you need ideas, observe your child during free time or when choices are available and note what items, activities, food, etc. they select.

Finally, **remember that this is a learning activity for you and your child.** Be patient. Teaching and learning at home may be new to some. Expecting too much, especially as you begin teaching, may lead to more stress for you and your child. Your goal is to make progress, not to achieve perfection.

References

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