

Activity Schedules

Make it visual- can be words, pictures, symbols, or a combination.

Make it interactive- if it is Velcro, the child needs to move the pieces, if it is written, they can check off as each step is done. The child must be the one to interact with the schedule.

Vary the activities from high-demand to low-demand. Another way to think of and depict this is to use the first-then, now-next format. This way your child always has something fun or easy to look forward to as soon as the harder activity is complete.

Include free-time spaces in the low-demand areas, but again provide visually represented structured choices. This teaches independent use of leisure time, and provides a space to begin including experimentation with new and expanding interests. In time you may wish to make a “try something new” block, with 3-4 choices of an activity with available materials for the child to try. This will help your child overcome anxiety about trying new things and increase his/her repertoire of interests to improve the likelihood of them sharing common interests with others.

Before homework begins, include a break to transition from school. Start with the most unliked or difficult homework first. Allow your child to have input in their schedule and make changes, but change the schedule before letting them change their sequence of behavior. Survey your child and experiment with location, such as at a desk or table, in a beanbag chair, laying on the floor. Other factors include lighting, bright or dim, snacks, background noise, radio, TV, silence. Once you establish a “place” for homework, keep it consistent.

Get control of the most desired materials/games, by locking them up if necessary, or removing TV/Computer cables. The parent role is to encourage the child to perform the high demand task so they may get access to what is next. The parent does not give access to the most desired materials/games until the child performs as required by the schedule.

It is CRITICAL that the parent is NOT critical. Your role is to be supportive and empathetic. You do not say, “Well, you are not doing it right, so you don’t get what you want.” You say, with faith and confidence, “You need to brush your teeth, then you watch a cartoon, I will be in the kitchen, so tell me when you are done.” You keep your anger out of your tone and body language. If you are a little mad or irritated your child will likely respond in kind, or just not respond. Your role is to support and encourage, and make it safe to make mistakes. You can empathize and validate by saying “You are mad you can’t have your Gameboy right now.” You can affirm and encourage by saying “I know you can figure this out, and I am looking forward to giving you the Gameboy when you finish setting the table.” And every time they complete a step, or master an obstacle



such as frustration, you give them the message they need, “You did it!” or “You figured it out,” or “I knew you could do it.” And you can always offer to help as support. You will like this role much better than being the critical one, and your child will like you better, too! When they think you are evaluating or judging them, they tend to become defensive, angry, and oppositional, because they think you are rejecting them, so they try to reject you first by ignoring, denying, or protesting. By the way, this is a very difficult cycle to master, because our culture has taught us this is the way to be. It requires diligence, discomfort, and work, work, work. But once habits have been replaced with improvements, it is so very liberating.

You can even work in personal goals in an activity schedule, including relationship-building activities. For example, you could put, “Go say ‘Hi, Mom, I love you, how was your day?’” into an activity schedule. Or “Give Dad a hug.” Or, practice accepting “No” by asking Mom or Dad something ridiculous, like, “Can I have a space shuttle, so I can fly to the moon tomorrow?” or, “Since I did my homework without being told, can you buy me a Corvette?”

The activity schedule may initially be resisted. That is why you need to have control over desired materials/activities, and you may need to withstand objection and behaviors. Calmly wait it out, and occasionally remind your kid what they need to do. Offer to help. You can also offer some flexibility and compromise. The activity schedule needs to be something they will learn helps them get what they want and helps make their time more organized, productive, and rewarding. Do not start with increasing demands over what is normally done. Start with what is normally expected and accomplished, build in the good stuff, too, then you can ask more high demand stuff later, as well as make it worth their while.

Anticipate that this may be a long-term process that will require adjustment and fine-tuning. It may not seem helpful the first week or even two. Operate from a position of patience, calm strength, confidence, and belief that your child will succeed. If you can maintain and model this as a state of mind, your child will read it and respond well.

An activity schedule may be a placemat, a sheet on the refrigerator, a poster on the wall, or a binder. Eventually it will be shaped into a planner such as a Dayrunner, most adults use these to organize their activity.

You may need to use a timer!

