

Creating structure at home for children with disabilities

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How to provide routine during stay-at-home orders

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How do I create structure for my child who has a disability during a quarantine?

We all use schedules. Children with disabilities also benefit from using schedules. There is a high probability that there will be a lot of disruptions in family life during this time. In making schedules for a child with a disability, it is important to find a place where a visual schedule is displayed, whether it is posted on the refrigerator, a wall or a door. Parents can fall into the trap of thinking that a child with a disability might intuitively understand their routine and know what is coming next, but they oftentimes need a more concrete description. Keeping topics specific is important, too. Rather than setting aside huge

chunks of time for vague topics like schoolwork or breakfast, break down the activities further into concrete tasks. For example, schoolwork could be separated into representations of reading, math and writing.

What is the importance of using schedules to create structure and routines for a child with a disability?

When kids have predictable routines, problem behaviors are less likely. Predictability can decrease the occurrence of these problem behaviors. Problem behaviors are sometimes a way for children with disabilities to communicate their frustration or tell their parents what they want. Knowing when activities happen can reduce some of these behaviors. Home routines are very different right now and having a schedule can also help a child realize that they still get to participate in some of the same activities they did before, just in a different way. Schedules and routines are tools to help communicate information about what to expect and when it is going to happen.

We all make choices during our day. How can parents give a child with a disability choices while having a predictable schedule?

Just as having a predictable routine can help to prevent problem behaviors, providing choices can also help with minimizing occurrences of problem behaviors. It is possible to provide choices within a schedule. For example, the schedule can indicate that it is time for writing and the child might be able to choose between writing with a pencil, a marker, or a crayon. Or they might be able to pick the type of paper or where they will do the writing (e.g., at the kitchen table, sitting on the floor) or maybe they can pick who helps them (e.g., mom or dad). Choices of materials, location and who helps can be incorporated into many activities. Choices within a predictable routine allows the child to have some control over their day.

With uncertainties about when the world will be completely “normal” again, how can parents make sure that creating structure for their children is something they can do for an indefinite amount of time?

To make a schedule, use something that can be easily modified or materials that you already have at home. For example, if you have a whiteboard on your refrigerator, you could put some tape on it, creating three different sections for a schedule. You could put three activities at a time on the whiteboard using Velcro or a magnet to hold pictures or objects that represent the activities, like a picture of a book or a snack they enjoy. When those are done, you take them off and put on the next three. If you have a printer and an internet connection, you can take pictures from an online source. Otherwise, you could use catalogs, magazines, or drawings. Some children with disabilities might need objects to help them to understand the activities on the schedule. For objects, you can use small

items such as a toy car for play, a marker for schoolwork or other creative solutions like a mismatched sock for laundry. Making a schedule does not need to be restricted to needing specific equipment or software.

What are some of the biggest or most common challenges parents could run into when creating structure for children with disabilities at home?

An important thing to consider is that you incorporate the schedules of the other people in the household. Other children and the parents who are working from home are going to have their own responsibilities. For example, if the child needs to do a reading activity and that is something where they would typically need assistance, then you want to make sure that you do not schedule reading at the same time that you have your projects that cannot be interrupted. Making sure that the symbols we use are appropriate for their age is important. Use a picture or other visual medium instead of text for a child who cannot read. Using a visual countdown timer to indicate when the next activity starts can be very helpful in maintaining consistency in schedule use. You can use timer apps on mobile devices or parents could even use the timer on an oven or stove.

Having a schedule with pictures or objects that a child with a disability understands can provide predictability to the child's day. Embedding choices within the schedule provides the child with some control over their routines. Schedules and choices can help to prevent problem behaviors in the home setting.