Creating Schedules

Schedules create a sense of consistency and security for children. When children know what activities are part of their day, transitions and activities can be easier and less stressful. Schedules are useful at school, home, and in the community. This article discusses key elements of creating a useful schedule.

1. Account for All Time – First, establish how much time will be included in the schedule. For example, 7:45 to 3:15 for a school schedule or 4:00 to 7:30 for a home schedule.

2. List Activities - Once the timeframe is established, make a list of the activities you would like the child to accomplish during the timeframe and the approximate time to complete each activity. Total the time. Add or remove activities to make the activity time and total schedule time approximately equal. When accounting for activities be sure to stagger breaks or fun activities into the day.

3. Establish a Schedule Format – Choose a format that best suits a child. Many children respond well to visuals. A visual schedule in the form of small objects (e.g. a spoon representing lunch time) often is useful for children who need more concrete representations. Pictures or drawings can be helpful for children who aren't reading yet. Text is useful for children who are reading.

4. Determine a Location – Put the schedule in a place that is easily viewable and accessible for the child. Placing it on a wall, at a desk, or on a device they carry is a way for children to reference the schedule as needed.

5. Create a Way to 'Use' the Schedule – Some classrooms have overall schedules visible to all of the children. For some children this is effective but many children need their own schedules to view and use. Individual schedules can be a row of velcroed pictures or words that are removed as children complete the task. Written schedules can be printed and activities crossed off as they are completed. When a schedule is created, teach children how to use it and provide reinforcement and support for children independently managing their schedule.

6. Build Choices into the Schedule – Everyone likes opportunities to be 'in charge.' Children are no different. Find opportunities for children to choose what they want to do in the schedule. For example, a choice board of activities during break times or picking what to do first, second, then third during math. Choice doesn't remove work or responsibility, it gives children autonomy and teaches decision-making skills.

7. Account for Inaccuracies in Time Estimates – Planning is never perfect. When designing schedules include flexible time activities before inflexible ones. For example, if the class has physical education at 10:15 put a break before physical education rather than an academic activity that may take more or less time than expected each day.

8. Practice Change – Sometimes schedules change unexpectedly. If you know in advance of a change, add it into the schedule. If not, practice activities like fire drills or unexpectedly leaving the house to pick up a sibling. Some people use a question mark card or other visual to represent a schedule change.