

MANAGING WAIT TIME FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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Waiting can be difficult for anyone, particularly for children with special needs, as times spent waiting could lead to challenging behaviors in your child. Learning how to wait is a valuable skill to learn, as some estimates say human beings spend about six months of their lives waiting in line!

The grocery store checkout, doctor's office, traffic tie-ups – all are situations where waiting may be necessary, and therefore potentially problematic for your child. Here are some tips for successfully managing wait times to navigate through them with your child.

First, mindset is key: remember that waiting is a skill to be learned. While it requires some planning on your part, as well as making sure that you have appropriate supports for your child, the learning that will occur as your child masters the skill of waiting will benefit your child later. Not only will this help your child transition better between activities, it will also help them to understand delayed gratification. Your child will also sharpen awareness of expectation, time, anticipation, patience and trust as you share this experience.

SET EXPECTATIONS

Acknowledge that unstructured time can lead to anxiety in your child, and when a child feels anxious, he or she may exhibit challenging behaviors. Knowing this will help you to plan ahead for situations in which waiting is likely to occur.

As a first step, anticipate the wait and find out what may be involved, particularly if you aren't familiar with this setting. If possible, check in where you'll be going to see if they are running on schedule. Schedules can get behind up as the day progresses, so a quick call to their office provides that information before you get on your way. If this is a new setting, ask about the waiting area and what's available within it. This will also help you know what kind of supplies to take along, such as antibacterial wipes, hand sanitizer and the like. Moreover, if there are items or toys with which you prefer your child not engage, knowing their presence ahead of time will help you gear up.

Next, prepare your child in terms he or she can understand for the wait by telling them why you'll be waiting and what to expect during the wait. This will help ease anxieties. For example, "today we're going to get the tires changed on mommy's car. We'll be waiting, and while they change the tire, we can watch them change the tires if you want! I'll be with you while we wait for the car to be done." Other information such as, "there will be

KEEP YOUR WORD: Remember that if you say you'll do something later with your child, be sure to keep that promise. It's important to reinforce your child's successful waiting by ensuring that he or she receive what you promised. This also builds trust with your child.



THE WAITING IS THE HARDEST PART : TIPS FOR MANAGING WAIT TIMES

TIME CONCEPTS

Avoid describing time in terms that your child might not understand such as, "it won't be long," "we'll only be there a little while," or specific times such as minutes or hours. These are abstract terms and difficult concepts to understand, and to them – any wait is going to seem like a long time! Instead, you could enjoy an activity together and have a timer in the background, such as an egg timer or visual timer. This might help your child see how time is "flying by" while you are engaged doing something together.

ANTICIPATION

In anticipation of the activity with a wait time, prepare a "wait bag" or "fidget bin" that you can fill with your child's favorite items, activities or toys. Ideally, these should be favored items such as a special book or toy, preferably something your child doesn't get to play with frequently. The possibility of playing with these "exclusive items" will give your child extra motivation for future events and visits! Let your child select an item when you arrive and begin waiting, and play with it while waiting. Be sure to have them return it to the "wait bag" or "fidget bin" for the next time, so the item remains novel to them. You can even have something small and edible in a baggie that you can have ready, if necessary.



MODEL PATIENCE

Be sure to be a good model for patient waiting! Your child is looking to you for cues, so when you are waiting for something with them, resist the temptation to pull out your phone (this is hard, I know!). It's also a good idea to limit technology for your child during wait times. Remember, the instant feedback a child receives from games and other electronic devices isn't going to help them to develop the skills to wait! Playing games together, naming items in the area of a certain color, or that begin with a certain letter are all fun!

TRUST

It's ok to say you'll do something later after the wait time, such as "we'll be able to go the park after they finish changing mommy's tires." You can clarify this verbal information by using a simple visual support, such as a quick hand drawn sketch that shows your child what happens first (tires changed) and then what happens next (visit the park). If your child is a reader, you can write down the order in which things will happen and review it with him or her. You can also refer your child back to this visual if he or she starts to get antsy. But remember that if you say you'll do something, be sure to keep that promise. It's important to reinforce your child's successful waiting by ensuring that he or she receive what you promised to them. This also builds trust with your child.

SOCIAL STORIES AS A TOOL

If the wait time will be something extended, or something on an ongoing basis, such as regular appointments for something, you might want to consider using a social story to prepare for the wait time.

Social stories, also known as behavior stories, are individualized short stories that illustrate a social situation your child may encounter. Social stories are used to teach skill development through the use of sequential information about everyday events that your child might find to be challenging or confusing. The primary goal of a social story is to reduce and prevent further anxiety.

An example of a social story in our tire scenario could be:

"When we go to the auto repair shop, I will have to wait with mommy while they change the tires; The auto repair shop will be filled with new smells and sounds; I might not like it; That is okay with everyone; I can take my "wait bag" and play with my toys while mommy and I wait for the new tires; When the new tires are on the car, mommy and I can go to the park."

You can see a variety of samples social stories, and download them for your use here: www.thewatsoninstitute.org/resources/behavior-stories The Watson Institute makes these free resources available for families, educators and caregivers.



a fish tank," or "they'll have a Lego® table" is helpful – if known, and can help you prepare for the environment you'll encounter.

If you think it will be a long wait, it may not be best to include your child. Try to plan so that you have a sitter. Instead, it may be helpful to include your child in shorter waits so that he slowly becomes accustomed to waiting and he is ready for a longer wait.

After the wait time, be sure to praise your child for the skills they demonstrated. Helping them to connect the experience to learning, and understanding their accomplishment are important!

Lastly, remember that calm environments encourage patience. Your child senses when you are anxious or frantic, so try to exercise mindfulness as much as you can. By carefully planning the visit, you'll be taking control and setting expectations where you can, reducing your anxiety and positively affecting your child in the process!

As a final note, as you think about the experience, consider what

worked and what didn't so that you can consider changes for the next opportunity you and your child have to practice patient waiting. Nice work – you've got this!•

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