

summer
FUN

HOW TO CREATE STRUCTURE DURING THE SUMMER

BY LISA PLASTINO, M.ED.

For many children with special needs, particularly those with Autism, classroom schedules and routines provide structure, which is critical in helping students manage behaviors and have successful days academically and behaviorally.

As the school year ends and summer break gets under way, you may start to notice the impact, that not having a schedule has on your child. Even if your child is in a summer school or camp program, there are likely to be more breaks and disruptions to routine than during the school year.

Because of this, you may recognize an increase in your child's

anxiety. They may have a lower tolerance for handling unexpected situations.

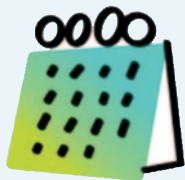
Your child may be craving that sense of structure. Sure, you may be thinking that summer break should be a time to relax and enjoy the longer days, not having to schedule every moment! And you're right, you don't need to schedule every second of the day, but you can still provide some structure while having fun!

MOTIVATION THEORY: If your child has chores to complete, you could create a visual checklist. Be sure to include their reward at the end of the checklist, so they know that they will receive the desired item or activity once they've finished the other tasks.



A FRAMEWORK FOR SUCCESS : INTRODUCING EVERYDAY STRUCTURE

Here are a few tips to help you and your child navigate the breaks that may occur in the summer like a pro!



1. CREATE DAILY ROUTINES

Many Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (autism) thrive in structured settings, where expectations are made clear and they can anticipate what will happen next in their day.

When a child with autism doesn't have the benefit of the structure that the classroom schedule offers, they may feel overwhelmed by their surroundings and may react when placed in unexpected situations. These feelings of stress and anxiety can often escalate into challenging behaviors.

By creating routines, even if it's just one routine for each day, you are providing the structure that your child may be craving.

Sit down with your child and talk through a typical day. Encourage them to help you build out the schedule if they are able to. For example, you could prompt them with "What is the first thing you should do to get ready for the day?" to which they may respond, "First, I brush my teeth, wash my face, and get dressed."

Lead them through the various routines they typically follow in a day: eating breakfast, completing chores/tasks, working on goals, eating lunch, etc.

If your child uses visual prompts, you could create a visual schedule, itinerary, or checklist for them to follow along with. You can ask your child's teacher for a sample visual schedule or materials that can be customized.

If they can work through the routine independently, encourage them to do so! This is a great way to boost your child's confidence and abilities to complete tasks independently.



2. CONDUCT A DAILY CHECK-IN

At the start of each day, do a quick run-down of any events or appointments that are on the schedule. Having an outline about the plans for the day can help you gauge if there are things that you'll need to prepare your child, and can help you anticipate any potential stress points for them.

During a daily check-in, you can give your child opportunities to make choices about the activities. This may give your child a feeling of control over the day.



3. USE VISUALS AND SOCIAL STORIES

If your child has more success following visual prompts or schedules, try to create one or use a customizable template! Visual prompts could include a mini-schedule which uses graphic representations of tasks for your child to complete. Your child's teacher will likely be able to supply you with the pictures or graphics that you will need.

For example, if you're creating a mini-schedule to help them get ready in the morning, you could include visual representations for brushing your teeth, bathing, and putting on clothes.

If your child has chores to complete, you could create a visual checklist to make sure

they've completed everything before moving on to a fun activity. Use photos or graphics to represent each chore, such as washing the dishes or taking out the trash. Be sure to include their reward at the end of the checklist, so they know that they will receive the desired item or activity once they've finished the other tasks.

Another great tool that can help your child maintain control and feel prepared is a social story. A social story, sometimes also called a behavior story, is an explanation of an upcoming event or situation to guide children through a situation. Within the story, include examples of appropriate responses and reactions to the situation. This offers your child a road map to follow when they are in a particular scenario.

For example, if you are going on a family vacation, you could prepare a social story about the vacation, explaining how your child will travel to the location and what types of activities they can expect to participate in while away. If you aren't sure how to write your own social story, find a customizable template online and adjust it to fit your situation!



4. LEAVE ROOM FOR FUN!

It's easy to get bogged down by the details and feel overwhelmed by the need to account for every minute of your child's day. But remember, it's summertime! Leave room in the day for your child to choose activities independently. If your child loves to color or draw, make sure they have time each day to doodle, be it indoors on paper or outside with sidewalk chalk.

By providing your child with choices and opportunities to select their own creative pursuits, you're giving them more control and autonomy. There are a number of ways you can prepare your child to have a fun and supportive summer break, if you plan in advance. Try out some of these tips and tools to provide structure for your child this summer! •

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Lisa Plastino, M.Ed. has worked in the field of special education for nearly thirty years, helping families, teachers, and students with special needs. In her current role as an Educational Consultant at the Watson Institute, Lisa provides training to educational teams working with students with disabilities in a variety of settings. She is an expert in early intervention, autism and related disorders, inclusive practices, structured teaching, and positive behavior supports