How to Use Visual Schedules to Help Your Child Understand Expectations

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Adults often use calendars, grocery lists, and “to do” lists to help complete tasks and enhance memory. Children as young as 12 months can also benefit from these kinds of tools and reminders. Often, children do not respond to adult requests because they don’t actually understand what is expected of them. When a child doesn’t understand what he or she is supposed to do and an adult expects to see action, the result is often challenging behavior such as tantrums, crying or aggressive behavior. A child is more likely to be successful when he is told specifically what he should do rather than what he should not do. A visual (photographs, pictures, charts, etc.) can help to communicate expectations to young children and avoid challenging behavior. Unlike verbal instructions, a visual provides the child with a symbol that helps the child to see and understand words, ideas, and expectations. Perhaps best of all, a visual schedule keeps the focus on the task at hand and negotiation about tasks is not provided as an option.

Visual schedules (activity steps through pictures) can be used at home to teach routines such as getting ready for school. These types of schedules teach children what is expected of them and reminds them what they should be doing.

When you create a visual schedule, the CHILD should be able to use the schedule to answer the following questions: (1) What am I supposed to be doing? (2) How do I know that I am making progress? (3) How do I know when I am done? (4) What will happen next?

Try This at Home

- Include your child in the creation of the visual schedule as much as possible. Let your child draw the pictures or take photos of their child doing the activity. Children LOVE seeing themselves in photos. You can also ask your child’s teacher for help with creating a visual schedule.
- Remember! Following a visual schedule is a skill that children need to learn. You can teach your child how to do this by referring to the schedule often.
- Allow your child to remove the photo of an activity once the activity is done. We all love checking things off our list!
- Choose a difficult time of day (i.e. getting ready for school, bedtime, etc.) to begin. Once it becomes routine, you can easily expand the visual schedule to include your entire day.

Practice at School

Visual schedules are used to show a clear beginning, middle and end. Visuals empower children to become independent and encourage participation. At school, visual schedules can be used to show a daily routine, a sequence of activities to be completed or the steps in an activity. Visuals can also help a child remember classroom rules or other expectations without adult reminders.

The Bottom Line

Visual schedules can bring you and your child closer together, reduce power struggles and give your child confidence and a sense of control. Visual schedules greatly limit the amount of “no’s” and behavior corrections you need to give throughout the day, since your child can better predict what should happen next.