

Blogs Children with Special Needs

Helping Young Children With Disabilities During a Trying Time: Adding Structure and Routine

Amid the COVID-19 crisis, you may be a parent or caregiver of a young child with special needs who was previously attending a child care center, preschool program, or receiving other services. You may now be caring for your child at home with few outside supports—and this can feel overwhelming.

We know young children thrive in predictable environments. When a child knows what will happen, he feels confident and empowered to do what is expected and participate appropriately. Your child's classroom or childcare program uses these strategies all the time. Routines for circle time, snacks, lining up, and playtime support children because they happen in much the same way from day to day. Children get a sense of the schedule through repetition but are often reminded of it with visual cues and verbal reminders.

While all children benefit from consistent routines, children with disabilities often rely on them more. Some children with disabilities have trouble with change, so keeping transitions predictable is key. Other children may have difficulty understanding verbal directions; visual directions and predictability are very helpful for them. Some children with cognitive disabilities have trouble understanding ideas of past, present, and future, and they rely on predictable events to help mark the passage of time.

So, if you are faced with adding structure to your child's day, here's a simple step-by-step plan to add some to your new normal. As you begin, remember that it needs to work for you and your family. You probably have a lot of demands on your time and attention right now. Start with something that's not too ambitious and build upon it as you are able, if you are able. Any effort you make is something to be proud of in these trying times.

Get Ready to Begin the Day

Do your best to keep your morning routines (waking up, eating, getting dressed) as similar as possible to what you have been doing. While it may seem as if there's no great reason to get up, wash breakfast dishes, or get dressed at the same time, these events have served as cues to your young child that the day is beginning. Maintaining these routines provides comfort and reassurance.

Decide on a “Start” and an “End” to Your Day

If you try to structure your day from 5 a.m. to midnight, you will wear out quickly! A typical day in childcare or preschool starts at 8 or 9 a.m. and ends at 3 to 4 p.m., even earlier if it's a half-day program. Determine how much of your child's day was scheduled or structured *before* you were home and use that or a shorter amount of time as a starting point.

Build a Schedule

It can be helpful to create a schedule when you have time to think without interruption, such as when children are asleep. It may take time to brainstorm ideas. It also can be helpful to bounce ideas off friends or family members.

When you plan, considering using Post-it notes, notebook paper and pencil, or an electronic document so you can create several different schedules until you find one that works for you.

As you plan, here are some tips to keep in mind:

Consider your child's attention span as well as your need for independence and work time. Start with 30-minute increments. If those blocks seem too long, try 20 minutes; if they seem too short, try 45 minutes.

Here are some examples for balancing the type of activities in your schedule.

- Balance a high-energy activity (Go Noodle) with a calm activity (reading).
- Balance an independent activity (watching TV) with an adult-led activity (FaceTime with Grandma).
- Balance an inside activity (a board game) with an outside activity (chalk drawing).
- Balance self-care activities (snacks, nap) with learning activities (playing, drawing).

As you plan, remember that what you select needs to work for you and your whole family. You may find yourself with *more* time to play with your child than usual, or you may find that work and other obligations require a lot of your attention. Build a plan that takes everyone's needs into account and remember you are already working very hard to get through a difficult situation. There's no need to feel guilty that you're not doing enough.

Communicate the Schedule You Have Created to Your Child

As adults, we use tools such as calendars and clocks to keep track of our day. Young children, including those with disabilities, also need to mark time and understand what is happening, but adult tools often don't work for them. Follow these steps instead:

- Use line drawings, clip art, or photographs to create a visual schedule. If you have access to a printer, use your photographs or clip art found online to create your visuals. For example, a photograph of your child's place setting can represent "lunch." Index cards of any size are ideal for posting your images, but any type of paper can work. As you create, don't stress about making it "perfect."
- Post your schedule in a place that you see often and at your child's eye level, such as a refrigerator or front door.
- Select a common auditory cue that accompanies a transition in the schedule. For example, ring a bell, sing a simple song, or ask your smart home device to set an alarm. If you are able, tell your child that a transition is coming ("We're going inside in five minutes").

Use Your Schedule and Celebrate

Having a schedule in your home may feel odd at first, but it may also help your young child feel proud and even more connected to you. For example, during "reading" time on your schedule, you might get some work reading done along with your child. Playtime or chores can be shared and enjoyable experiences. During screen time, you might check your e-mail while your child uses a tablet.

At the end of your scheduled day, celebrate with a hug or high five. Following a routine is rewarding, but it takes effort. A collective "we did it!" is in order.

Get Ready to End the Day

Similar to getting ready in the morning, keeping your child and family's bedtime routine as similar as possible can provide comfort and predictability. Familiar routines signal to your child that the day is over and it is time to rest.

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About IEL

The Illinois Early Learning Project Web site is a source of evidence-based, reliable information on early care and education for parents, caregivers, and teachers of young children in Illinois.

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