



Empower Autism

Structure in the Home

Many people with autism experience a large amount of anxiety regarding upcoming activities, even if those activities are simple household events such as bathing or mealtimes. Transitioning from one activity to the next can be difficult, even if the transition happens all the time (such as leaving for school in the morning). Adding some autism-friendly structure to your daily routine can reduce anxiety and put you and your child on the same page about what will happen next.

Creating structure in the home sometimes means changing your own behavior, which is never easy. Families who have decided to structure their homes often report feeling that the initial effort was worth the rewards. Many of them say they experience smoother transitions, increased independence, and fewer meltdowns. However, structuring your home and daily routine does not ‘cure’ autism, nor does it take the place of appropriate medication and/or therapy.

Here are some low-cost structure techniques that often work for people on the autism spectrum:

Get a monthly calendar

Add meaningful events to the calendar, such as school days and non-school days, holidays, doctor appointments, and social plans. Post it somewhere your child can read it. Each night, or each morning, briefly review the day’s events while pointing at the calendar.

Use small schedules throughout the day

Get a notebook for schedules and leave it in the same spot in your house. If your child can read a little bit (they don’t need to read full sentences), write out the small tasks or activities between larger events, such as arriving home from school and dinner. It might look like this:

- Go inside
- Put away coat and backpack
- Eat snack
- Watch TV or play video game for 30 minutes
- Do homework
- Go to park with Mom
- Dinner

When your child arrives home from school, meet the bus or meet them at the door with the schedule. Quickly go over the routine, and then leave the schedule out where they can see it all afternoon. Refer back to it and cross things out when they are complete. Even if your child will spend the entire afternoon having ‘downtime’, it might make them happy to have that written down for them (like a contract).

You could write a downtime schedule like this:

- Go Inside
- Put away coat and backpack
- Choice time until dinner

Choices are: eat snack, TV, go outside, read, computer, draw, help mom

- Dinner

At the end of dinner, you could write another list of what will happen between dinner and bedtime. If you have never used a schedule at home before, please see our **‘Teaching a Schedule’** handout. In general, schedules should end with a preferred activity. This is intended to motivate a child to complete non-preferred activities before they do a rewarding activity.

If your child cannot read, you will do all the same things, except that the schedule will include pictures or icons with each item. You can print schedule pictures at do2learn.com for free. Consider printing some routines and keeping them in a 3 ring-binder for repeated use.

Use a timer for transitions

Setting a timer can let your child know how long they have to do an activity. You can use a timer for both preferred and non-preferred activities. If you want your child to get off the computer or shut off the TV, set a timer and tell them that when the timer goes off, the TV or computer is going off. You can use timers for any kind of free-time or downtime, or activities that have no concrete end (such as drawing). The timer works better than you saying ‘it’s time to go now’. If you’ve never used a timer to assist transitions before, please see our **‘Teaching the Timer’** handout.

Use verbal transition warnings

This is the classic ‘5 minute warning’. It helps kids remember where they are, what they are doing, and what will happen next. A good warning sounds like this: “In 5 minutes, we will turn the TV off. Then we can eat dinner.” It’s usually a good idea to ask for some kind of confirmation from the TV-watcher or video-gamer. After you give the transition warning, you could ask: “What will happen in 5 minutes?” If you have to, stand in front of the TV when you give the warning and check for understanding.

You can also use transition warnings in the car. Sometimes when we get busy or overwhelmed, we forget to tell kids where we are going. It’s best to write down a list of what will happen (grocery store, gas, home). This way, if your child is envisioning high-tailing it home to the TV, they won’t be as confused or upset when you stop at the store. Even if you don’t write it down, tell your child what is going on when they are riding in the car. Then, before you arrive at your destination, remind them about the expectations (“when we get to ingles, I want you to stay with me, and keep one hand on the shopping cart”).

Post expectations around the house

If there are things you would like your child to do all the time, or if there are things you find yourself saying over and over again, write them down, and post them in the room where they apply. For example, if you are always reminding your child to hang their coat up, write a sign that says ‘hang up coat’ (with a picture of a coat hanging up). Place the sign where your child will see it, at exactly the moment when they should be hanging up their coat. A ‘hang up coat’ sign is fairly useless in the bathroom, for example). Often these kinds of signs are more fun if they include high-interest topics.

For example, if your child loves Sponge Bob, make a sign with Sponge Bob saying the rule. A favorite character is fun to look at, so the child is more likely to want to look at the sign if something they are interested in is on it. If a sign gets boring, you can change up the character and post it back up.