



# Empower Autism

## Teaching a Schedule

### Why use a schedule?

Often, people on the autism spectrum experience a large amount of anxiety regarding what will happen and when it will happen. Transitions are often difficult for people with autism, even if they are transitions that occur every day. People on the spectrum sometimes have a tendency towards establishing routines for themselves. These routines may or may not be productive or healthy for them. Using a schedule can do several things for a person with autism:

1. Address anxiety about what is happening and when it will happen
2. Prepare people for upcoming transitions
3. Create healthy routines

### What kind of schedule should we use?

There are several types of schedules. There are written schedules, picture schedule, photo schedules, and object schedules. The idea is the same with all of these: to visually list upcoming events in the order than they will occur. A written schedule is like a to-do list. A photo or picture schedule is like a to-do list, but uses picture cards for each item. You can find more information about all kinds of schedules from the **Family Support Network** (a free resource library located in the lobby of Mission Children's).

If your child can read, they should generally use a written schedule. If they can't read, they should use a picture or photo schedule (the difference between these is that a picture schedule is made of computer-drawn icons, and a photo schedule is made of photos you take of the actual things your child does/uses/eats). Photo and picture schedules usually have the word written on them as well. An object schedule is for people who have trouble associating the meaning of pictures to events. It attaches specific objects to events, and is fairly uncommon because it is cumbersome to use.

### Types of Schedules and who should use them:

Schedule Type	Written	Picture	Photo
Who Should Use?	People who can read at least one word phrases	People who cannot read, people who prefer to look at pictures than read	People who cannot find meaning in computer generated icons, and who need literal photos of their own stuff

### Starting to use a Schedule

If you've never used a schedule before, or your child uses one at school but not at home, then you should start small. You can just use a schedule for a small portion of the day to start out. Pick a time of day that is usually pretty smooth. For example, if the time between dinner and bedtime is pretty predictable, and doesn't usually cause a lot of arguments, then it is a good time to practice using a schedule. The first phase of using a schedule is the 'buy in' phase. You want your child to feel good about the schedule, and you want to feel good about it too. The schedule is intended to help with difficult transitions, but it won't work unless you both know how to use it. It is more fun to learn how to use a schedule during an easier part of the day.

*(Step 1—bookends)*

Dinner

Lights out for bedtime

*(Step 2—details)*

Dinner

Clear dishes

Watch TV

Bath

PJ's

Lights out for bedtime

**Step 1:** Get a pen and paper to jot notes for yourself. Pick two natural 'bookends' to start and end your first schedule (such as a meal, a predictable arrival home, or waking up/going to sleep). Remember that this should be a fairly smooth part of the day. Write the starting one at the top of the page, and the ending one at the bottom of the page.

**Step 2:** Fill in the activities that occur (for your child) in between these 'bookends'. Check your list against reality. When dinner time comes, pay attention to what your child does, and make sure your list includes everything. Do they wash their hands? Do they turn off the TV?

**Step 3:** Pick a day to start using the schedule. Tuesday is a great day to start a new routine. Right before dinner on *Monday*, tell your child that the schedule is a list of things that happen between dinner and bedtime. Show them the schedule you made, and ask them to help you decide if the schedule is correct. Point to each item on the schedule as you begin the activity. You might say "Ok—it says Dinner. Great! Let's eat!" Before you are done eating, point to the next thing and say "So, when what will happen after dinner...Clear Dishes" When dinner is finished, cross it off and say "Dinner is finished. Now we clear the dishes". As you are clearing the dishes say "What does the schedule say after dishes?" When the dishes are clear, ask your child to cross it off, then ask them to say the next item out loud. You want to be very calm and complimentary while you talk about the schedule. Don't drag it out, just tell them the information, and send them off to watch TV. At some point during the evening, tell your child that you will start using the schedule tomorrow (Tuesday). Continue to transition using the schedule and verbal prompts in the following way for the 'practice day', and until your child can follow the schedule without you having to say anything (this will involve 'fading your prompts, which means you slowly stop saying stuff and pointing to the schedule. Fading prompts is a later step).

### Reminders about using a schedule

- If you are just starting out, pick a short, fairly easy time of day to begin using a schedule. This time of day should have a clear start and end (such as a mealtime, bedtime, or predictable arrival or departure from home). Some common examples:
  - Wake up until departing for school
  - Arriving home from school until dinner

- Dinner until bedtime
- When using a schedule, give verbal reminders about the next item *while you are still doing* the previous item.
- If you are just starting out, try not to put too many un-preferred items on the schedule at all. If you do put them on the schedule, put them in the middle, so that the beginning and then end of the schedule is preferred activities.
- In general, end any schedule with an activity the child enjoys. It will motivate them to complete the previous steps.

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](http://do2learn.com) for free. Consider printing some routines and keeping them in a 3 ring-binder for repeated use. The Family Support Network can help you make visual schedules for your home. They are located in the lobby upstairs from the Olson Huff center.