



Empower Autism

Teaching a Timer

A timer is a useful device for structuring the beginning and end of activities. 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).

Any kind of timer will work. The digital kitchen-type timers usually work the best, and you can get them at wal-mart or ingles for less than \$8.

If you've never used a timer to assist with transitions, it helps to start off using it to indicate the start of positive activities or the end of un-preferred activities. These are normally easy transitions anyway (because the person is already motivated to transition). This way, the noise of the timer will be a welcome sound, because it will indicate something good. If you start by using the timer to indicate the start of something un-preferred (or the end of something preferred), then your child will dislike the timer.

Spend about a week using the timer just to indicate that good things are about to happen. For example, if your child dislikes reading, but enjoys the computer you can set the timer to indicate the end of reading time/start of computer time. If your child dislikes exercise, but really loves eating lunch set the timer to indicate the end of exercising/start of lunch.

After you've spent a week teaching your child that timer can indicate good things, it's time to use it to make medium-difficulty transitions. These are the transitions that are not the hardest, but not the easiest. For example, if your child likes to play outside (but it's not their absolute favorite thing) and doesn't really like homework (but it's not their most hated thing), then that would be a good transition to practice with. Use the timer for medium-difficulty transitions before you use it for difficult transitions (going from a very preferred activity to a hated activity).

The Main Challenge

The timer helps to prepare people for upcoming transitions, but it can't MAKE them transition. Your prompt attention to the timer, and your decisive action following the timer's ring are what makes the timer a good tool. Just as a hammer is useless without a human, the timer is also useless without human interaction. See the following section for specific advice about using the timer.

The Script

In order to use the timer correctly, both you and your child have to know what activity is coming up next. It's best if this is written down or pictured on a schedule.

When you set the timer, say “I’m setting the timer for ____ minutes. When the timer rings it’s time for _____”. Then check for understanding by saying “What will happen when the timer rings?” If you have to, prompt the right answer by saying “when the timer rings, it’s time for _____”. Then check for understanding again.

About a minute before the timer goes off, give a gentle reminder “We have about one more minute. What will happen when the timer rings?” If you have to prompt the correct response again, go ahead and do it. Half the battle of a transition is being on the same page about what will happen next.

Following Through

The timer will not be an effective transition tool if it rings and the transition you promised does not occur. You are responsible for creating the transition when the timer rings (at first). If the timer is supposed to mean that it’s time to come inside, you should say “Timer is ringing, time to come inside” If you have to take a child by the hand, or pick them to come inside that is ok. This level of follow through is absolutely necessary. It may take a little getting used to for a child, but if you consistently follow through like this, it will only take a few weeks for the timer to seem like a law in your household.

However, if you cannot make a transition happen after the timer rings, and you do not follow through, both you and the timer will lose credibility, and you will see a weakening of transition skills.

A timer can be a useful tool for any transition that doesn’t already have a clear ending.

To use a timer effectively

1. Purchase a timer
2. Explain to your child how it will be used (preferably in a visual and a verbal format)
3. Follow through on your transition (if you have to, go ahead and unplug the TV, shut off the computer, physically pick someone up, etc.) when the timer rings.
4. Use the timer frequently enough that your child stays familiar with it.