

Routine and Expectations

Routines help children understand time management by allowing them to engage in preferred activities while also balancing important habits or chores, such as brushing their teeth or completing homework. Routine not only establishes calmness and stability for children, but also for parents.

The Important of Routine During a Stressful Event

Maintaining a normal daily routine makes it easier for children and families to stay calm during times that are stressful. Anxiety and stress often stem from feeling that there is minimal control surrounding an upcoming event. By establishing a consistent routine, families can assert control when their circumstances feel overwhelming.

Promoting Compliance

Creating a routine that allows for smooth transitions between more preferred activities to less preferred activities can be difficult, however, parents can promote compliance by teaching their children that they can work towards earning preferred items or activities by following through with an unpreferred task or expectation first.

Establishing Routine and Compliance with First-Then Expectations



“A child reminds us that playtime is an essential part of our daily routine”

-Ralph Waldo Emerson



First-Then Expectations

The concept of first-then means that first a child has to follow-through with an expectation or demand set by an adult, and then they get rewarded by doing something that they like. For example, “first you need to eat your breakfast, then you can play with your dolls”. The following considerations are important for imposing first-then expectations:

- The reward needs to be something that your child actually enjoys or desires
- It is critical that your child completes the demand before accessing the preferred item or activity. Hold in there, this is sometimes the most difficult part!
- Ensure that once your child follows through with the demand, they immediately get to access the reward

Selecting Rewards

Try to choose items or activities that your child is naturally enticed by or asks for frequently. For example, when you give your child free time to do what they want, what do they usually choose? Crafts, dolls, toy cars, video games, music?

Alternating Activities

To create a schedule throughout the day, it is helpful to alternate between preferred and non-preferred activities so that your child always has something to look forward to. This is particularly important for transitioning between preferred to non-preferred activities. If your child knows that they need to transition to something they do not like but will shortly be able to access something they do like, they will be more likely to follow-through with the demand.



“First you need to read for 10 minutes, then you can play with your dolls for 10-minutes”

Tips for Implementing First-Then Expectations

The following are tips that will make it easier to establish and follow through with a first-then expectation:

- Use a visual schedule so that your child is aware of the upcoming events and expectations for the entire day. You can write this on a whiteboard or piece of paper, review it at the beginning of the day, and cross activities or tasks off as you go
- Use a timer (ie. on your phone, or the oven) to set clear limits for how long an activity or task will occur
- Provide warnings to your child prior to ending a preferred activity. For example, “In 2-minutes we will be putting away your drawing”