



## DISTANCE LEARNING: ESTABLISHING ROUTINES & SCHEDULES

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As we jump into the reality of distance learning, we want to remember that children learn best and thrive with daily routines and schedules. Distance learning is significantly different than that of a typical in-person learning environment and we need to be aware of how this change will impact our kids. Technically, we are now allowing our kids to “work-from-home.” The role of the student is a childhood occupation, and just like you have to maintain certain routines, schedules, and structure for your daily work, so do our kids. How has this time inside COVID-19 changed your daily work? I would think for the majority of us a lot has changed. We want to be careful about how we manage our daily routines, especially for our kids. Do you feel things are too flexible, lenient, or relaxed? Or to the opposite direction, do things feel chaotic, disorganized, and stressful. In both of these scenarios there is no structure, so everything can feel a bit off. Neither of these learning environments provides a sense of security or stability that a daily routine can provide for our kids. As creatures of habit, we thrive on structure and daily practices that better prepare us mentally for the challenges we expect to face. In doing this, we prevent feeling overwhelmed by the *unexpected* obstacles we will likely experience in our day to day environments. The same goes for our children who rely on structure and routines that teach them the same sense of security we know, but to also help their cognitive, emotional, and social development as well.

Structure and routines give our children a sense of security and help them to recognize, practice, express, and reinforce concepts of self-regulation. With daily routines, a child can anticipate what to expect throughout the day, which helps them to better regulate feelings and behaviors. This can also help prevent him/her from feeling overwhelmed.

In the following, we hope you'll find some helpful tips and strategies that you can try to help you and your child implement a weekly schedule that enhances and prepares you both for his/her daily routines. Keep in mind we can (and need) to leave room for some flexibility within our daily routines to have spontaneity, creativity, laughter, and fun! Remember to adapt your child's routine as needed and be sensitive to both your child's and your own needs in the process!





# How to Build a Visual Routine or Visual Schedule for Your Child

**What is a visual routine or visual schedule?** Simply put, a visual routine or a visual schedule uses picture icons to help organize and structure daily routines and/or daily, weekly, or monthly tasks and activities. It is much like a calendar, but for children making it visual in the form of images helps them develop a clear understanding of what needs to happen and the order in which things will occur.

**So what exactly is a visual routine?** A visual routine involves tasking out each step of a particular activity that you do daily. For example, washing your hands. The steps are as follows: (1.) turn on the water, (2.) wet hands, (3.) pump soap onto hands, (4.) rub hands together to create suds, (5.) rinse hands under the water until suds are gone, (6.) dry hands on a towel. Now, all that seems pretty automatic for you or I, but for some children who have difficulty with sensory processing, motor delays, trouble with motor planning, or find it hard to keep focus and attention, breaking down routines into small tasks can be helpful.

**So what exactly is a visual schedule?** A visual schedule involves sequencing information related to daily, weekly, or monthly activities. Much how we keep a calendar, the only difference here is that activities are presented in a visual manner using images. Having a visual schedule helps to decrease feelings of anxiety and unpredictability of what may be coming up next.

**So how do I create the icons for a visual routine or visual schedule?** Well if you like to DIY, you can simply take pictures on your phone or camera of familiar objects that represent the steps in a routine or upcoming activity. You can then print those photos (usually 2x2-inch is a good size) and use them in whichever visual system you choose. I try to keep the photo prints small so that you can use multiple icons on a page or travel with them. You can also find and download many pre-made visual schedules online. The only disadvantage here is that they are not always customizable and may be stock images that your child does not connect with as something familiar. Either way, once you have obtained the pictures you need, then you will need to organize them into a visual system.

But before we get to organizing, you may want to consider ways to help your pictures last. I prefer to use Velcro, and find it particularly useful as it helps children to manipulate the icons with you as they learn the system. I put the Velcro on the back which make them easy to display. Helpful tip! – If you use Velcro put the loop-side (soft-side) on the back of the picture where your child will touch and the hook-side (rough-side) to where your child will be attaching the picture. I suggest lamination since it is very durable and stands up to all kinds of wear-and-tear.





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***What visual system should I choose to organize my visual icons?*** There are many systems available for storing, organizing, and displaying your picture icons, and again it really is a matter of preference. You can store them in a binder, small file envelope, index card box, or photo box. To organize icons, I would suggest to organize similar icons by routine; such as all the morning hygiene tasks go together in one section, evening hygiene tasks in another section, all the indoor play activities go in one section, and all outdoor play activities go in another section, etc. You can also organize schedule icons the same way, morning activities, afternoon activities, and evening activities. Now that we've discussed ways to store and organize icons, let's figure out how to display them for your child.

Again, how you display your icons for a visual routine or visual schedule will need to be specific to your child's needs and what works for you as a family. If you have a routine that takes place in the same room each day, for example brushing your teeth, then I suggest displaying the schedule in the bathroom. You can attach a strip of Velcro to the mirror and put the steps up there, hang it on the wall next to the mirror, or place it on the counter just to the left or right of the sink (for this one, make sure to secure it and laminate it as things will get wet!).

If you are using schedule icons, you may want to display these in a common room that is visited frequently throughout the day such as the kitchen or family room. On the go? Put your schedule icons in a small binder where you can store and display them easily. Putting a Velcro strip on the front outside cover is a great way to display needed icons with all the other icons tucked inside the binder for storage.

As you and your child get accustomed to using a visual schedule, I then suggest offering "visual choices." Start out simple, choosing between two choices or activities. Children can make a choice to then put on the schedule. For example, help your child choose between two preferred activities or activities that require a selection choice like books, movies, or food. Your child can pick what he/she wants for lunch and that goes on the schedule!

I will be the first to admit that visual routines or visual schedules may be a bit time intensive to create on the front end but are SO WORTH IT when the feelings of overwhelm and emotional distress are seen less frequently. And there is no right or wrong way to create a schedule that works for your child! Be creative and find what works. Don't be afraid to change things that aren't working. And as always, if you want help, consult with your child's occupational therapist!

