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Coping with Unexpected Changes



What to do when things go as planned

don't



There is a common misperception that individuals with autism spectrum disorders and other related disabilities are not able to cope with changes in daily routines or with unexpected events.

It is the experience of many families and professionals that children and adults with autism spectrum disorders accept changes quite well when the information they receive about it is timely, and presented in a manner that is consistent with a person's individual communicative strengths. Often, if an expected event is deferred or delayed, individuals are satisfied to know that it can't happen now, but may happen later [be as specific as possible or practical].

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Daily schedules

Today is Tuesday October 18, 2005

What activities?	Who?	Where?	Time?
Wake up	Me	My room	6:00
Shower	Me	Bathroom	6:10
Breakfast	Mom and me	Dining room	6:30
Go to school	Mom and me	Car	6:45
School	Teachers, kids and me	School	7:00
Go home	Driver, kids and me	Bus	2:45
Homework	Mom and me	Home	4:30
Dinner	Mom and me	Dining room	6:00

Photos

Picture Symbols

Text

Other tutorials in this series, and other sources of information can go into more detail about the relationship between communication and behavior. In this tutorial, we will focus on some practical ways to avoid challenging behaviors in situations in which unexpected changes in daily routines or schedules are unavoidable. The most useful and basic tool to begin with is a schedule that travels with the individual from home to school or work, and is updated daily with all the significant events anticipated for that day.

The following guidelines (source: Tips and Ideas for Making Visuals to Support Young

Children with Challenging Behavior by Rochelle Lentini and Lise Fox, University of South Florida

<http://challengingbehavior.fmhi.usf.edu/docs/strategies.pdf>) can be helpful in deciding upon the best format for the schedule, and can be determined by evaluating the most effective means of communication for the individual.

Object Stage: use of actual objects and items for communication needs.

Photo Stage: use of real photographs (photo, digital, scanned, magazines, catalogs, coupon ads) for communication needs.

Picture Symbolic Stage: use of colored line drawings (hand drawn or commercially produced) for communication needs.

Line Drawing Stage: use of black and white line drawings (hand drawn or commercially produced) for communication needs.

Text Stage: use of written words and/or numbers for communication needs.

TIP: Use **written text along with** photographs, pictures, and line drawings, to promote reading. Written text also assures that everyone interacting with the individual uses the same language for a particular item.

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Using the schedule to avoid problems – planned changes

- Football game Friday.
- No pizza tonight. Pizza Wednesday night.
- No thank you! Cheese sandwich.
~~Peanut butter and jelly sandwich~~ for lunch today

Provide information on long-term (weekly or monthly) schedules as soon as possible.

Prepare daily schedules the night before if possible.



Be sure they go with the child or adult to school, work or other daily activity locations.




Allow space on the daily schedule for the individual to edit/comment

If events are several days, weeks, or months away, write in or add pictures to a wall calendar.

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Using the schedule to avoid problems – **UN**planned changes

~~Football game Friday.~~  
Uh oh - storm is coming.
No football today.
Maybe football next Friday

No pizza tonight.   No Wednesday
~~Pizza Wednesday night.~~  Friday
No money \$ Wednesday.
Pizza Friday.

Advance warning is important, but there is no absolute length of time for everyone that is universally adequate. The rule of thumb is – alert the individual to changes in routine or schedule as soon as they are known.

Sometimes you know months ahead of time, and sometimes the changes have to be made in the middle of a sequence of events by erasing or scratching out one thing & adding another. An elaborate picture schedule prepared at home using a computer may need to be amended with stick-figure drawings during the school day, or in the car.

It doesn't always matter how the information is relayed to the individual, as long as it is in a format he or she understands.

It is not necessary to be a professional artist or have clip art at the ready. Most of the time, you can easily communicate with text, stick figures or in other


simple ways.

TIP: Keep small spiral notebooks in the car so you can create quick notes and drawings as needed on the spur of the moment.

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Scenario 1

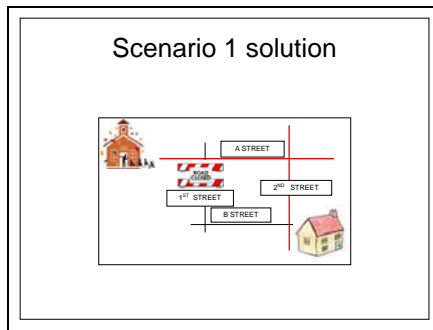
You are driving your young child home from preschool, taking the same route you take every day. One of the streets you usually take is closed for construction, and you have to take a detour. Your child starts screaming in the back seat. What are your options at this point?



The image shows two traffic signs. The top one is a rectangular sign with a red and white striped border and the words "ROAD CLOSED" in black. The bottom one is a yellow diamond-shaped sign with a black arrow pointing right and the word "DETOUR" in black below it.

Scenario 1: You are driving your young child home from preschool, taking the same route you take every day. One of the streets you usually take is closed for construction, and you have to take a detour. Your child starts screaming in the back seat. What are your options at this point?

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Scenario 1: solution:
Pull over before doing this. Don't draw and drive! Sketch out a line drawing of the usual streets you take with a picture of the point of origin at one end, and your house at the end. You can label it, "Our house" or "Home" or use whatever term the child understands. Then you can cross those streets off and re-draw the route, and write/say, "Today we will go on another street to our house." The message that is important is that the end result will be the same – we will get home. If you know

ahead of time that a street will be closed, make a similar diagram before taking the route, showing home at one end, and the destination at the other.

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Scenario 2

Your son has been asking all week to go to his school's football game on Friday night. Friday morning, you carefully add the football game to his daily schedule so he won't pester his teachers all day long about going to the game. That night, after your family has enjoyed attending the game, you are driving home, and someone suggests stopping for pie and coffee at one of the family's favorite restaurants. You know your son loves to go to this restaurant, so you say, "Sure, let's do that, it will be fun," not imagining there could be a problem with this pleasant change in the plans. You turn down the street to go to the restaurant, and your son becomes highly agitated, saying, "No restaurant, no restaurant. Go home!" What happened, and what can you do about it?

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This situation may have nothing to do with not liking the restaurant, and more to do with the fact that the plan was to go home after the game. Now that plan is gone, and he may feel that along with the schedule change, his certainty about the entire evening's subsequent activities has now vanished.


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Scenario 3 – solution

Many teachers now carry cell phones with them at all times, or check e-mail frequently throughout the day. Ask your child's teacher or aide for the best way to contact her if emergencies or changes arise during the day.

For children who can read:
In this case, call, or e-mail the teacher and ask her to add "I will not ride the bus today. Today Mom will come get me in the car after school." "Go to the doctor" to the schedule.

For children who do not read well enough to use text only:
Ask the teacher to draw a picture of a bus crossed off and a car, and a stick figure of a doctor, or...



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Scenario 3 – solution

...ask if the teachers at the start of the school year if they have access to clip art in the classroom.

You may want to provide a page of sticky labels pre-printed with pictures of school buses and cars, people of different professions, or places you commonly visit in the community, such as grocery stores, drug stores, etc. Photos of cars similar to yours can usually be found online by searching in Google images: <http://images.google.com> for the make, model, color and year.



If it becomes necessary to let the child know that he or she will not ride the bus that day, the stickers can be placed on the schedule at the appropriate places.

If your child can read, the teacher can simply cross off the word "bus" on the schedule, and replace it with "car", or "Mom's car", or whatever term is consistently used, and add "Go to the doctor" before "Go home".

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