

RESPIRE TIP



COMMUNICATION TIPS FOR MANAGING UNPREDICTED CHANGES IN ROUTINE

May is Speech and Hearing Awareness Month, the perfect time to talk about the power of communication and your child. In this Respite Tip, we talk about ways to help people with high needs cope with surprise changes in routines.

What are unplanned transitions?

Unplanned transitions are unexpected or sudden changes in routines, like a snowstorm that cancels school or work, or a sick day at home. Feeling disappointed, sad or angry when plans change suddenly is natural, but sometimes these reactions are strong and extra support may help prevent or reduce a tantrum.

How do I prepare for unplanned transitions?

We know that ‘unplanned transitions’ are hard to plan for. Get to know what kind of change upsets your child. Think about the following:

- Is your child upset when you suddenly stop at the store to pick up milk on the way home?
- Is your child upset with school cancellations?
- Is your child upset when different people pick him/her up from preschool, recreational activities, or after school?

Now think about the things your child enjoys doing. How can you include these in talking to your child about routine? For example, think about the following activities:

- Looking through photo albums

- Looking at and talking about the calendar on the fridge or the wall
- Helping with grocery lists or holding “important” pieces of paper for you

Using things your child likes may help him or her manage a sudden change in the expected routine. Pair an enjoyable activity (e.g. making up the calendar on the fridge with pictures of people/places) with the more difficult one of having your child accept a change in routine (e.g. staying home vs. going swimming). Shifting the focus away from your child’s expectation (e.g. “swimming first, and then home”) to the routine of making up the calendar may help your child be more flexible about the change.

Now the calendar is being used to talk about changes in routines, you need to think about replacement activities, something your family member really likes to do. For some people with high needs, it is not enough to explain that a change is happening. There needs to be an activity available that they really enjoy to help cope with the change. This creates a feeling of comfort for your child, who is learning that the calendar can be about good and fun information.

What about transitions on the go?

While the calendar (or picture schedule) can serve as a visual reminder for your child at home, what might help when you are in the car, or out in the community? Some children have a hard time keeping track of how many errands need to be done before going home. Try keeping a photo album in the car with pictures of places you visit a lot in your community (the grocery store or the library). Try using a Velcro strip with numbers or pictures of items your child likes (e.g. numbers; cats; cars). As each task is completed, your child can take off the pictures. This will help your child understand what needs to happen before going home or to another place.

These strategies can be helpful when you need to explain unplanned transitions to your child. Next week’s article will focus on communication tips for transitions within activities. These transitions can be challenging when your child does not enjoy a particular activity or step in the sequence of a more complex routine that has many steps (e.g. Getting Ready for School – and your child refuses to get dressed or brush their teeth).

This article was prepared by Julie St-Pierre, a speech-language pathologist with Atlantic Clinic for Communication Disorders, in Halifax. Julie was a respite care provider for seven years and continues to provide support to families.

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