How to Use Visual Routines to Help Your Child Understand Expectations

Adults often use calendars, grocery lists, and "to-do" lists to help complete tasks and enhance memory. Children as young as 12 months can also benefit from these kinds of tools and reminders. Often, children do not respond to adult requests because they don't understand what is expected of them. When a child doesn't understand what they are supposed to do and an adult expects to see action, the result can be frustration or challenging behaviour. A child is more likely to be successful when they are told specifically what they should do rather than what they should not do. A visual (photographs, pictures, charts, etc.) can help to communicate expectations to young children and support their understanding.

Unlike verbal instructions, a visual provides the child with a symbol that helps them to see and understand words, ideas, and expectations. Perhaps best of all, a visual routine keeps the focus on the task at hand and negotiation about tasks is not provided as an option. Visual routines may also help children stay regulated, because they can confidently see what is happening next in their day.

Visual routines (activity steps through pictures) can be used at home to help children learn routines such as getting ready for school. These types of schedules show children what is expected of them and remind them what they should be doing. Visuals can also be used to communicate changes in the daily routine which also helps to prevent frustration or confusion.

When you create a visual routine, the CHILD should be able to use it to answer the following questions:

1. What am I supposed to be doing?
2. How do I know that I am making progress?
3. How do I know when I am done?
4. What will happen next?

Suggestions for Families

Include your child in the creation of the visual routine as much as possible. Let your child draw the pictures or take photos of your child doing the activity. Children LOVE seeing themselves in photos. You can also ask your child's educator for help with creating a visual routine.

Remember! Understanding and following a visual routine is a skill that children need to learn. You can help your child by referring to the visual routine often.

Allow your child to remove the photo of an activity once the activity is done. We all love checking things off our list!

Choose a difficult time of day to begin (e.g. getting ready for school, bedtime). Once it becomes routine, you can easily expand the visual schedule to include your entire day.

Practice at School

Visual routines are used to show a clear beginning, middle and end. Visuals empower children to become independent and encourage participation. In your child's centre, visual routines can be used to show a daily routine, a sequence of activities to be completed or the steps in an activity. Visuals can also help a child remember classroom rules or other expectations without adult reminders.

The Bottom Line

Visual schedules can bring you and your child closer together, reduce conflict and give your child confidence and a sense of control. Visual schedules greatly limit the amount of "no's" and redirection or reminders you might need to give throughout the day, since your child can better predict what should happen next.