What are Activity Schedules?

Activity schedules are a sequence of visual cues, such as pictures or photos, which help a child with autism complete complex tasks or series of tasks or activities independently. Most often, activity schedules are displayed in a three-ring binder with a picture of one activity or step in a task on each separate page of the notebook.

What types of skills can I teach with it?

Typically, activity schedules are not used to teach new activities, but to help children with autism achieve increased engagement and independence in performing activities that they already know how to do. For example, you may have a child with autism who knows how to do a variety of play activities, such as puzzles, looking at books, and building lego creations. However, the child does not typically initiate these tasks independently and perhaps never moves from one activity to another without adult prompting. An activity schedule would assist the child in both initiating the activities and sequencing between them without adult assistance. While the primary goal of activity schedules is typically to increase engagement and decrease disruptive behaviors (such as stereotypy), activity schedules can also be used to increase social interactions by embedding cues for social interactions into the schedule.

How do you do it?

The book *Activity Schedules for Children with Autism: Teaching Independent Behavior* gives a clear and detailed description of how to create and teach activity schedules. Here we give just a basic outline of how to do this and suggest referring to this book for more details.

Using the Schedule:

The ultimate goal is for your student to independently use the schedule following a simple command like "Go play" or "It's time to do your jobs." When the student has learned to use the schedule, he will go to his notebook and open it up. He will point to the activity on the first page of the schedule, collect the materials for the activity from a specific location, and complete it. He will

then put the activity away, return to the schedule, turn the page and follow the same procedure for the next activity. He will continue to do this until he reaches the end of the notebook.

Teaching Use of the Schedule:
To teach your student to follow the schedule, you use a strategy called graduated guidance. With graduated guidance, you start by first gently physically prompting the child through the motions of following the schedule. As the student starts to learn the routine, you gradually use less and less physical prompting until the child is doing the schedule independently.

V*ariations:* There are a number of variations on the standard activity schedule. One variation is to embed social initiations into the schedule. For example, you might have a picture (or a phrase if the child is reading) that says, "High-5." You then teach your student that when he or she encounters this picture or word, she needs to find somebody with whom to do a "High-5. Another variation is to do the schedule on a computer using Power Point, by creating a slide show presentation of the schedule. This provides a number of possibilities for enhancements such

as inserting video models of an activity into the Power Point and having auditory cues as well as the pictures. For a detailed description of the possibilities, see the article "Activity Schedules, Computer Technology, and Teaching Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders" in the resources below.

Does it work?
Yes. There are a number of studies showing that activity schedules can increase on-task behavior and decrease disruptive behavior in children with autism.
For information on the research behind activity schedules, see Research Brief # 3: Activity Schedules.

Resources
McClannahan, L.E. and Krantz, P.J. (1999) *Activity schedules for children with autism: Teaching independent behavior.* Bethesda: Woodbine House.

Stromer, R., Kimball, J.W., Kinney, E. M., & Taylor, B.A. (2006) Activity schedules, computer technology, and teaching children with autism spectrum disorders. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disorders. 21, 14-24.*

The Professional Development in Autism Center (PDA) provides training and support for school districts, families and communities to ensure that students with ASD have access to high quality, evidence-based educational services in his or her local school district.

See more tip sheets and research briefs at the PDA Center website:
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