

A day in pictures

The sight of a young child grasping the leg of a parent, eyes filling with tears, afraid of being left alone in a new environment can be heartbreaking, even to the most experienced teacher. Children entering a preschool or elementary classroom for the first time must be filled with a million thoughts about their teacher and peers.

Reservations also fill the minds of confident children—fearless of anything, seemingly happy to be in a new place, and experiencing something new. Some of these questions, which we’ve all heard countless times, might include “Is it time for lunch yet?” or “When is my mom coming to pick me up?”

Questions like these are common during the first few days and weeks of school. For some children, these questions persist, often accompanied by feelings of anxiety. As parents and teachers, what can we do?

One way to help ease that feeling of anxiety is by providing a personal activity schedule. A personal

activity schedule can be used to outline important events a child might encounter in a new situation. The goal of an activity schedule is to help a child feel more comfortable with what the day will entail. Observant to signs of stress in a child’s life, teachers can use strategies to reduce the stress that a child might be experiencing (Copple and Bredekamp 2009). For children in preschool or elementary classrooms, an activity schedule might be just the tool to help them settle into a new environment and alleviate stress and anxiety.

Activity schedules

Activity schedules allow daily routines to become visual and personal to the child. They have been found to increase independence in children in a variety of tasks (McClannahan and Krantz 2010). An activity schedule often consists of a sequence of pictures, images, or drawings of activities that are familiar to the child. Allowing children to identify and look forward to recognizable events may ease feelings of anxiety. By alleviating the uncertainty of the unknown, children may be able to focus on engaging with peers and the learning process. To select meaningful images, teachers can collaborate with the child, parents, and other educators.

When creating an activity schedule, a teacher needs to consider the age and needs of the child. Young preschool children may need an actual photograph of the activity, such as a photograph of their favorite snack to represent snack time. Primary grade children may be able to relate to a more abstract picture of a snack, like a drawing of an apple.

Activity schedules can be as elaborate as you would like them to be. Clip art and photographs can be used to create a schedule that accurately represents key activities in a child’s day. Relevant images

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drawn by the child or teacher may also communicate the day's routines. The child should be able to understand the sequence of activities, regardless of how decorative the images appear. When creating an activity schedule, a teacher needs to walk through and discuss each item with the child to develop ownership of the schedule.

The activity schedule should be kept in a familiar place each day. For example, teachers might encourage children to keep it in their cubbies and refer to it when they are feeling anxious or curious. Making the schedule small so that the child can carry it throughout the day is another option. At the end of the day, a teacher and the parent may decide that the activity schedule be sent home. This would allow parents to support their child's familiarity with the schedule. Additionally, using the activity schedule to help the child get ready for school the next day may alleviate any feelings of anxiety about returning to an unfamiliar or intimidating place.

Application for teachers

As teachers, we likely have our daily schedule posted in the classroom. While a posted class schedule is good practice, some children may need something more personalized. The goal of a personal activity schedule is to communicate the daily schedule in a way that is meaningful for the child. For preschool and primary age children, this strategy is a tool to outline expectations and soothe any feelings of anxiety.

An activity schedule might include common daily activities and routines such as outdoor play, lunch, centers, and dismissal time. An individualized activity schedule might begin with a picture of breakfast, if this is the first activity a child encounters when arriving at school. If a child is experiencing separation anxiety, the final picture of an activity schedule can show the child's school day ending, possibly with a picture of the child's parents or home.

English language learners

For teachers with English language learners (ELLs) in their classroom, an activity schedule expresses through images what words may otherwise not be able to convey, due to the language barrier. A pictorial activity schedule may provide the needed visual cues when oral language may be unfamiliar or unknown to a child.

Anxiety is an issue children face in learning

language, and it can have a debilitating effect on a child's ability to speak English (Woodrow 2006). Incorporating the written word along with pictures can also reinforce print found and heard throughout a child's learning environment. For example, the word *music*, accompanied by the picture of a musical instrument, indicating it is time to go to the music center reinforces print awareness.

New students

Activity schedules are helpful for preschool and primary teachers when dealing with new students. Children entering a new learning environment for the first time may have difficulty adjusting to a setting different from their home. At this point, a child may be more focused on "I want my mommy!" than the surroundings.



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In addition, children may also feel trepidation when transitioning to a new classroom. For example, a child accustomed to having outdoor play prior to lunch may find that this routine is now changed.

By using a picture schedule, teachers can help alleviate the feelings of anxiety and undesired behaviors a child might exhibit when encountering a new situation. The activity schedule can help children build a sense of normalcy and help familiarize themselves with the routines and expectations of the teacher.

Children with special needs

For children with special needs, the use of visual supports may enhance comprehension and anticipation, while increasing task engagement (Raver et al. 2013). For instance, a child with a hearing impairment relying on visual, rather than auditory processing, may find the picture schedule useful as a means of communication.

Additionally, knowing the sequence of activities ahead of time may be beneficial for a child with a diag-

nosis on the autism spectrum. Activity schedules help children gain independence in a variety of tasks within and between learning centers (Pierce et al. 2013).

Schedule changes

Picture schedules may also be of use when working with children in settings outside the normal school day, such as field trips or changes in the daily schedule. In this way, activity schedules may help children learn flexibility by preparing them for any upcoming changes. With the teacher's help, children will know how to handle the variation in routines.

Application for parents

An activity schedule is a useful tool not only for teachers but also parents. Children are continually encountering new situations. An activity schedule may help reduce the feelings of anxiety a child encounters when facing a new or unique situation, such as spending the night at a friend's house, visiting the doctor, or staying with a babysitter.

One such experience that usually creates anxiety in children, and adults, is a visit to the dentist. Children may already have preconceived notions that a trip to the dentist is a painful adventure. To lessen this anxiety, a parent can discuss exactly what will happen at the dentist's office. Most parents have this discussion with their child anyway, but an activity schedule takes this conversation one step further. A parent can sketch a quick picture schedule that a child can have while visiting the dentist. The schedule might

include images of the following:

- waiting in the lobby,
- sitting in the exam chair,
- cleaning teeth,
- receiving a new toothbrush, and
- feeling proud of gleaming teeth.

An activity schedule can be used as a tool for a recurring or one-time event, with the same goal of reducing anxiety.

Finding images

Remember, an activity schedule does not need to be professionally created. Often you can sketch a picture schedule quickly as you discover the need of it. If you have time to prepare an activity schedule ahead of time, you can find a variety of clip art images that you can copy or trace. A favorite resource for free clip art, including the ones created in the example provided, can be found at www.mycutegraphics.com.

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You might also consider taking photographs of different activities a child might encounter such as getting in and out of the car, eating at lunch, and taking a nap. You can easily print the photographs and place them in sequential order from top to bottom or left to right on a length of paper for a small and personal pocket-sized schedule. If you want to make a more generic activity schedule for the whole group to use, place images on mounted poster board or across a long boarder on the classroom notice board. Laminate the pictures or images for durability. If you expect changes in routines, you can slip pictures into plastic pockets that you can move around or make a whole new schedule board. Regardless of how an activity schedule is represented, it should be meaningful to the child.

An activity schedule may provide teachers and parents with a strategy for working with children who might be feeling stress or anxiety. Additionally, the personal activity schedule can help provide answers to some of the questions children might have when entering a new or unfamiliar situation.

PHOTO BY SUSAN GAETZ



Ruby's school day



Go to school



Eat breakfast



See Ms. Rodriguez



Circle time



Morning centers



Reading



Eat lunch



Nap



Outdoor play



Afternoon centers



Clean up



Go home

Produced with images from www.mycutegraphics.com

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Adam Akerson began his career in San Antonio teaching children in early childhood settings. He earned a doctorate of education in curriculum and instruction with an emphasis in early childhood education in 2011 from the University of Houston. Currently he is an assistant professor in elementary education at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas. He teaches a variety of undergraduate and graduate level early childhood courses and also works with pre-service and mentor teachers in local schools and early childhood facilities in East Texas. ■