The Support Shelf

# Visual Schedules

*Printable picture schedules for the routines your child does every day.*

SHELF 3 · EVERYDAY LIFE

Made by a Registered Behavior Technician who works with autistic kids and their parents every day.

thesupportshelf.org

# How to use this

A visual schedule is a short row of pictures that shows your child what happens next. It takes about ten minutes to make one. You do not need special icons, laminating, or a craft night.

Pick one routine that is hard right now. Print the cards on pages 7 and 8, add a photo or a quick drawing to each one, and put them in order on the strip on page 6. Tape it where your child will see it at eye level. That is the whole thing.

Pages 9 and 10 help if the schedule stops working after a week, which is normal.

## START HERE IF

| | |
|---|---|
| Your child is new to schedules, or gets upset when one thing ends and another starts | First / Then card, page 5 |
| You want the whole morning or bedtime routine in one place | Daily strip, page 6 |
| You want to understand why this works before you make one | Page 2 |
| You made one, and it stopped working | Page 10 |

> **One rule that matters more than the rest.** The schedule is for your child, not for you. It exists so they know what is coming. It is not a chore chart and it is not a reward system. If it starts to feel like a tool for getting compliance, go back to showing what comes next.

# Why a schedule you can *see* helps

Most of the hard moments in a day happen at a change: leaving the house, turning off a show, getting in the bath. A picture schedule takes the surprise out of the change.

## Words disappear. Pictures stay.

"After this we're getting dressed" is gone the moment you say it. A card on the wall is still there when your child looks up again, and again after that. They can check it without asking, and without you repeating yourself.

## It makes the day predictable

Many autistic kids do best when they know what is coming. The schedule answers "what's next?" before the question turns into distress. Fewer surprises usually means fewer hard transitions. Not none. Fewer.

## It takes you out of the middle

When the schedule says bath comes after dinner, the bath is not your idea anymore. It is just what comes next. Pointing to the card is calmer for both of you than negotiating.

## It teaches "done"

Turning a card over, or moving it to a "done" pocket, gives a clear end to each step. For a lot of kids, the end of one thing is harder than the start of the next. A visible "done" helps.

### THREE THINGS THAT MAKE THE DIFFERENCE

1. **Real photos beat clip art.**
   A photo of your actual bathtub, your front door, their own shoes. Your child recognizes their world faster than a cartoon of it. Phone photos printed small are fine.

2. **Short beats complete.**
   Start with 3 to 5 steps, not the whole day. A first/then card with two pictures is a full visual schedule. Add steps once the short one is working.

3. **Use it when things are calm.**
   Walk through the schedule before the routine starts, when nobody is upset. Mid-meltdown is not the time to introduce a new card.

If your child is in ABA, show your BCBA the schedule you made. They may already use one in session and can match the two so your child sees the same thing in both places.

# Build one in ten minutes

Here is a morning schedule one family made, next to the steps to make your own.

1 **Pick one routine.**
The one that is hardest right now. Morning, bedtime, leaving the house, bath.

2 **Write the steps the way your child would say them.**
"Shoes," not "put on footwear." Three to five steps. If you have eight, you have two routines.

3 **Take a photo of each step.**
Their toothbrush. Their bowl. The car. Print them small, or draw a quick version. Stick figures are fine.

4 **Put them on the strip in order.**
Page 6. Tape, velcro dots, or a paper clip at each slot so cards can come off when done.

5 **Hang it at your child's eye level**
where the routine happens. The bathroom mirror for teeth. The door for leaving.

6 **Walk through it once when things are calm.**
Point to each card and say the step. Then use it tomorrow.

EXAMPLE · MORNING

| | |
|---|---|
| 1 | Potty |
| 2 | Clothes |
| 3 | Breakfast |
| 4 | Teeth |
| 5 | Shoes, then car |

Five steps, each one a photo from their own house, taped to the fridge at the height of a five-year-old. "Shoes, then car" is one card because in that house they always happen together.

# Plan yours

One routine. The steps in your child's words. The photo you need for each. Fill this in before you cut anything out.

**THE ROUTINE**

*Bedtime*

| STEPS, IN MY CHILD'S WORDS | PHOTO I NEED FOR EACH ONE |
|---|---|
| *1. Bath* | *the tub* |
| *2. Pajamas* | *their pajamas on the bed* |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |

**WHERE IT WILL HANG**

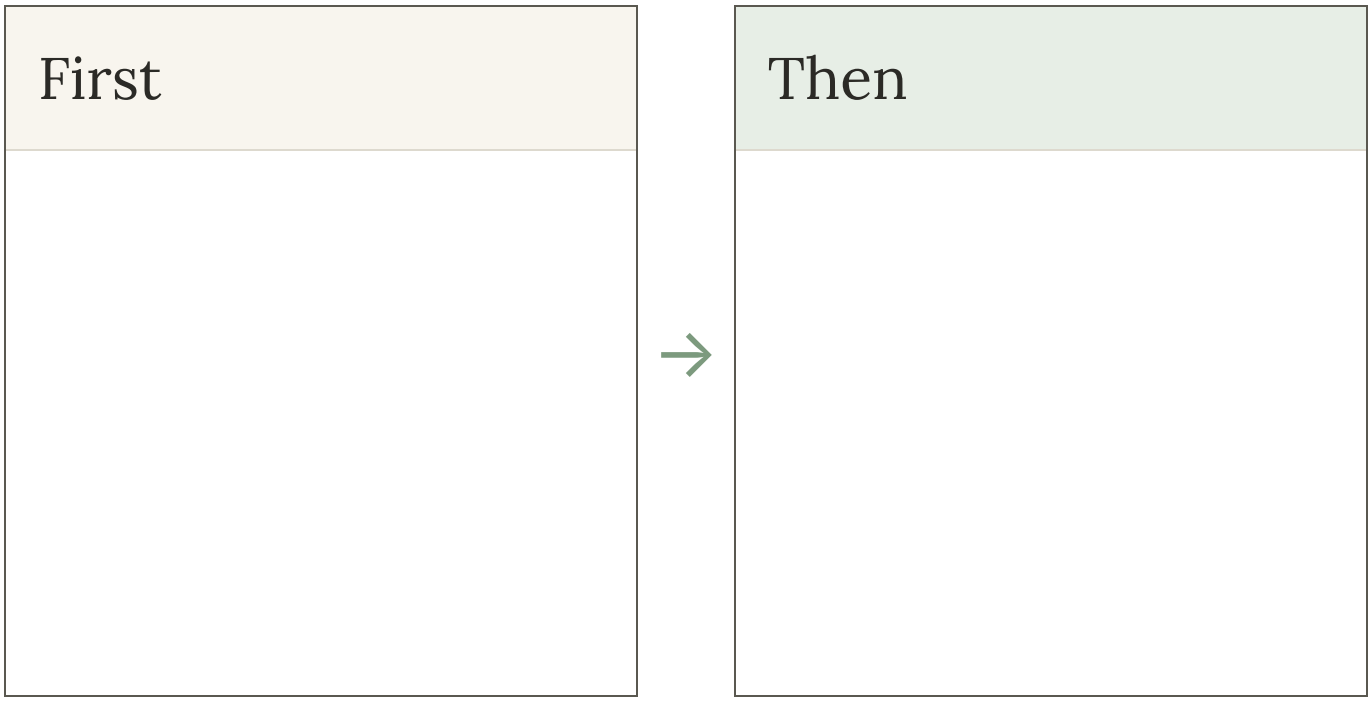
*Bathroom door, at eye level*

## BEFORE I HANG IT

- [ ] The last step is something neutral, not a treat.
- [ ] Every adult in the house knows the word for each card.
- [ ] It is at my child's eye level, in the room where the routine happens.

# First / Then

The simplest schedule there is. Two pictures: the thing that is happening now, and the thing that comes after. Put a card in each box.




Cut along the outer edge if you want it on a clipboard. Add a strip of velcro inside each box, or just tape the cards. Many families keep this one in the car and the bag.

**Keep "then" honest.** The "then" card is whatever really comes next, not a bribe. "First teeth, then book" works because the book was always coming. If "then" is only ever a treat, the card stops being a schedule.

# Routine strip

Six slots, top to bottom. Tape a card in each one. When a step is done, your child moves the card to the "done" box, turns it over, or ticks the square.

THIS IS MY

*bedtime schedule*

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | | ☐ DONE |
| 2 | | ☐ DONE |
| 3 | | ☐ DONE |
| 4 | | ☐ DONE |
| 5 | | ☐ DONE |
| 6 | | ☐ DONE |

# Picture cards

Sixteen of the steps that show up in most homes. Paste a photo or draw in the open space, then cut along the dashed lines. Cross out any label and write your child's own word for it.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Wake up | Potty | Clothes | Breakfast |
| Teeth | Shoes | Car | School |
| Snack | Play | Outside | Clean up |
| Dinner | Bath | Pajamas | Bed |

# Blank cards

For the steps that only your house has. Therapy, Grandma's, the dog, the bus, medicine. Write the word on the line at the bottom. Print this page as many times as you need.

# After one week

Use the schedule for seven days before you decide anything about it. Then fill this in. It takes two minutes and it tells you what to change, if anything.

### THE ROUTINE I TRIED

*Morning, five cards, on the fridge*

### EACH DAY, DID MY CHILD LOOK AT IT OR USE IT?

| DAY | LOOKED AT IT OR USED IT? | WHAT I NOTICED |
|---|---|---|
| Day 1 | ☐ | *pointed to "teeth" before I said anything* |
| Day 2 | ☐ | |
| Day 3 | ☐ | |
| Day 4 | ☐ | |
| Day 5 | ☐ | |
| Day 6 | ☐ | |
| Day 7 | ☐ | |

### THE STEP THAT IS STILL HARD

*Leaving the house. Shoes are fine, the door is not.*

### ANYTHING THAT WENT SMOOTHER THAN BEFORE

*Teeth. No arguing twice this week.*

Two or more checks out of seven means it is working, even if the mornings are still hard. Keep going. Zero checks means something about the schedule itself needs to change. Page 10 has the usual reasons.

# When it stops working

Almost every schedule stalls at some point. It is nearly always one of these, and the fix is small.

| WHAT YOU SEE | WHAT IT USUALLY MEANS | WHAT FAMILIES TRY |
|---|---|---|
| My child ignores it | It is above their eye line, or it is not where the routine happens. | Move it lower, and into the room where the steps actually occur. |
| They rip the cards off or throw it | Too many steps, or the schedule got attached to a hard moment. | Go back to First / Then with two cards. Rebuild from there. |
| They skip straight to the last card | The last card is the fun one and the rest look like obstacles. | End on a neutral step, not a treat. Make "done" the reward: turning the card over. |
| It worked for a week, then nothing | Novelty wore off. That is normal. | Change one photo. Let your child place the cards in order themselves. |
| The steps don't match real life | Mornings changed, or a step was never really a step. | Rewrite it. A schedule that is wrong teaches your child to ignore schedules. |
| Only one parent uses it | The other adults were never walked through it. | Show everyone once. Same words for each card from every adult. |

> **If the hard moment is about safety, not the schedule.** If transitions bring hitting, head-banging, or running off, a picture schedule is not the tool for that part. Tell your child's BCBA or pediatrician what you are seeing. They write that plan. The schedule can still help with the rest of the routine.

### WHAT I'LL CHANGE THIS WEEK

*Move it to the bathroom door. Try again Monday.*

# What now

One routine, one strip, one week. That is the whole assignment.

## THIS WEEK

- [ ] Pick the routine. Write it on page 4.
- [ ] Take the photos tonight. Phone is fine.
- [ ] Print pages 6 and 7. Cut, tape, hang.
- [ ] Walk through it once with your child when things are calm.
- [ ] Seven days later, fill in page 9.

## NEXT ON THE SHELF

**Morning & Bedtime Routines** (Everyday Life) picks up where this leaves off: ready-made step cards for the two hardest transitions of the day, and a page for what to do when the routine falls apart.

**Family Communication Board** (Support at Home) is the grown-up version of this: one board so everyone in the house knows the plan for the day.

If either one isn't out yet, the email box on its shelf at thesupportshelf.org/shelf will tell you when it is. One email, then nothing else.

The Support Shelf is made by a Registered Behavior Technician, not a BCBA. These pages help you build and organize a schedule. If your child has an ABA team, they write the plan. Nothing here replaces that.