

Five Ways to Help Your Child With Autism Cope With Summer's Relaxed Schedule:

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Summer. Those precious sun-soaked, school-free weeks are, to most kids, a nectar. And let's face it: We parents don't mind the lighter load that comes with no homework or after-school activities. But that same relaxed schedule can be a challenge for children with autism and their parents. Those kids often rely on—and thrive in—the structured environment that the school year provides. At least five days a week, they know exactly what is going to happen, and when, for the most part. That helps them make sense of a world that can be overwhelming with its constant barrage of sounds, smells and transitions.

“If you think about what autism is, there are two main areas of difficulty,” said Lauren Kenworthy, the director of the Center for Autism Spectrum Disorders at Children's National Medical Center in the District. “One is around social interactions, and the other is around a strong need for repetition and stability and sameness. They tend to get a lot of that from school, where they have the same schedule each day.”

I recently spoke with Kenworthy by phone and she offered ways for parents to help their child with autism learn to cope better when things are more fluid or don't go as expected. Here are her suggestions:

- Use a **calendar** to label “typical” summer days, weekends, vacations and holidays. Then create a “typical day” schedule that follows the school schedule as much as possible in terms of lunch time and breaks. It can be very specific if you like, or it can be more vague. Think about the things that will happen every day, Kenworthy said, from brushing teeth to reading for a half an hour, and include those in the schedule to give your child a cue of how to move through the day. Make it very visual so your child can refer to it to get an idea of what is coming up.
- Talk to your child about having a Plan A, but also a Plan B **in case things don't work out**. For example, if you're planning to go to the pool, tell him that if a storm comes up or the pool is closed, you might do something else, and that is your Plan B. Help your child learn to make contingency plans by talking to him when you have to adjust your own plans. By teaching him that it's not the end of the world when plans change, you can help him learn how to regulate himself before he has a meltdown. “Tell them how you manage unexpected things, how you cope with it when you feel disregulated,” Kenworthy said. “Talk out loud, and say ‘This isn't what I expected, I'm feeling very upset, I think I need a Plan B.’ Kids can really engage with that process, with parents asking for help with their problems. Then the next time you say we need a Plan B, that really means something to the child.”
- Avoid developing **bad habits**. It can be tough to stick to a schedule during the summer, when you just want to relax and let go a little bit, but the more you can keep to a routine for meals and sleep, and continue to limit screen time, the more well-regulated your child is likely to be, Kenworthy said. You know what causes your child to feel overloaded. For some kids, it's a messy house. For others, it's certain kinds of noise. And for still others it can be an unexpected deviation from plans. Maintaining a routine and upholding normal house rules, even in the summer, can help prevent her from reaching her breaking point.
- **Recognize the warnings**. It's important to know the signs that your child is getting overloaded and remove him from challenging situations before a meltdown if possible, Kenworthy said. “Catch them at the rumble, not the rage stage,” she said. “Ask yourself what are the warning signs and know what you can help them with. And it sounds strange, but we say don't just do something, stand there. Sometimes the best thing you can do is step back and watch your kid, instead of talking a lot, because that's not going to help.”
- Keep things **positive**, always. With any child, it's more effective to reward good behavior than to punish bad behavior. Kenworthy said parents should try to praise their child four times for every one time they correct something. That can be challenging when your child is really pushing your buttons, but Kenworthy suggests using a pen to mark praises on one of your hands and corrections on the other so you can keep track of how often you're doing each. You can make that praise concrete by using stickers and a reward chart. Give him a star every time he is flexible or completes a task in a timely manner or manages a transition well. Once he gets a certain number of stickers, he earns a treat such as special one-on-one time to play a game with a parent, or choosing the family's dessert.