

Research Brief #4  
October 2016



## Activity Schedules

Authors: Holly Whittenburg, Whitney Ham, & Jennifer McDonough

### What are Activity Schedules?

An activity schedule is a type of visual support that provides permanent visual reminders of the order of events or tasks that occur in a given period of time. It describes when an activity will happen, when it will end, and what will occur after that (Ganz, 2007). In other words, activity schedules function similarly to day planners or to-do lists. Although all activity schedules visually organize events or tasks in a sequential manner, there are several different ways to represent items on the schedule and to format the schedule itself. For instance, depending on how the learner makes sense of information, small objects might be used to represent activities on the schedule. Other learners might benefit from simple photograph/picture and word pairings to label activities, while others might use a more traditional written or typed to-do list. Activity schedules can be located in one particular spot, or they can be portable, by using a clipboard or binder for a paper-based schedule or a smart phone or tablet for an electronically-based one.

### Why use an Activity Schedule at work?

Activity schedules may be used at work for a variety of reasons. For instance, they may be created to assist individuals who have difficulty transitioning between tasks. A schedule helps make transitions more predictable, since the user can literally see what is happening next. An activity schedule might also be developed for someone who relies on cues and prompts to start or end tasks. Because activity schedules provide permanent visual cues on what to do that are not attached to a person, they can help increase the independence of the person using the schedule. Finally, activity schedules may build self-determination skills by helping individuals feel more in control of their lives and surroundings and by developing choice-making skills (Duttlinger, Ayres, Bevill-Davis, & Douglas, 2012; Watanabe & Sturmey, 2003).

### Who benefits from Activity Schedules?

Activity schedules have been used with learners across a wide range of ages, from preschool-aged children to adults. They may be helpful in remediating difficulties

with transitioning and auditory processing that some learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) experience by making transitions more predictable and by presenting changes in a visual manner (Banda, Grimmer, & Hart, 2009; Ganz, 2007). Activity schedules may also help compensate for memory deficits experienced by some people with intellectual disabilities (Duttlinger et al., 2003). In short, activity schedules are promising tools for teaching independent work and transitioning skills.

## What does the research say about Activity Schedules?

Activity schedules have been designated as an evidence-based practice for working with individuals with ASD by several groups and researchers (Knight, Sartini, & Spriggs, 2014; National Autism Center, 2015; National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorder, 2015). Although not as much research has been done with older students and adults in vocational or workplace settings, the work that has been done so far suggests that activity schedules may help learners transition independently between tasks, exercise choice-making skills to increase on-task behaviors, and create and use activity schedules to independently complete tasks in the classroom and community (Carson, Gast, & Ayres, 2008; Duttlinger et al., 2012; Watanabe & Sturme, 2003).

## How can Activity Schedules be used in vocational and workplace Settings?

This intervention can be used in a variety of ways to help individuals keep track of their everyday job tasks, work accurately and independently, and decrease the time spent transitioning between tasks. Here are some examples of how activity schedules have been used at work.

- This schedule uses Velcro to affix each of the tasks listed. It was developed for a young man with ASD who needed support in remembering all of his assigned cleaning and stocking tasks, but who also grew bored by doing the tasks in the same order each day. With Velcro, he was able to arrange the tasks in the order he wanted to complete them each afternoon, but still retained the permanent visual reminders he needed to ensure that all the tasks were done.



|            |  |   |   |
|------------|--|---|---|
| 9:25-11:05 | 1. Stock items from table on my cart.<br><u>Make sure I have 6-8 boxes on my cart before I begin stocking.</u> |  |   |
| 9:25-11:05 | 2. Find the bin location.<br>If you're not sure, ask "Can you help me find this item?"                         |  |   |
| 9:25-11:05 | 3. Put the items in the bins, moving old stock to the front of the bin.  |  |   |
| 9:25-11:05 | 4. Stock the boxes neatly.<br>You can find someone and say "I need help stocking neatly."                      |  |   |
|            | Is the table empty or full?  |  |  <br><b>YES= GREAT WORK!</b><br><b>NO= go to next page and get 6-8 more boxes</b> |

- This more complex picture/words schedule was used by a young man with ASD who had previous experience in school-based settings using an activity schedule. He relied on his schedule to work independently by checking off each task as he completed it, but he also was somewhat rigid in his adherence to it. While interning in a warehouse setting, he was responsible for repeatedly unpacking stock and putting it away. To help him understand the cyclical nature of the work, his schedule was ad-

justed by displaying the stocking cycle steps several times over the entirety of the schedule. A decision-making step was also added to his schedule. It showed a picture of two tables--one empty and one full of boxes. He was taught to circle the box that represented what he saw in front of him at work, circle the answers to the questions beside the picture, and then follow the directions based on his answer choice. With these adjustments in place, he successfully completed all of the stocking cycle before moving onto his next work assignment.

- This simple photograph and words schedule was created to help a young woman with ASD who was working in a cafeteria. She moved slowly from task to task and often required prompting to start on the next step of her job. Once the activity schedule was implemented, she began to work more independently. She kept her schedule in page protector sheets in a three-ring binder and used a dry erase marker to check off each task after it was completed. At the end of each workday, she wiped off the check marks so her schedule was ready for use the following morning.

| AFTER LUNCH                        |   |
|------------------------------------|---|
| 1. Wash Hands                      |  |
| 2. Get bucket and towel            |  |
| 3. Fill bucket with cleaning water |  |
| 4. Wipe tables                     |  |

## What needs to be considered when using Activity Schedules at work?

It is important to keep the following considerations in mind when implementing activity schedules in work or vocational settings. First, develop a plan to teach usage of the schedule. It might be sufficient to model how to use the schedule, or the learner might need more direct instruction, such as through a system of prompting, to master it. If prompting, be careful to minimize verbal prompts, such as “What’s next?” when teaching schedule use. The instructor’s questions or directions might inadvertently become embedded in the routine, resulting in the learner waiting for the verbal prompt to use the schedule, instead of initiating use on his or her own. Try point or partial physical prompts instead, and fade them quickly as the learner starts to use the schedule independently. Also, be sure to discuss with the individual his or her preferences for the activity schedule, including the type (photographs, pictures, words, or a combination) and format (binder, smart phone, clipboard, index cards on a ring) of the schedule, and take those preferences into account when creating it. If the learner is unsure or cannot communicate his or her preferences, trial different kinds of schedules with him or her to see which one works best. Finally, as with all workplace supports, ensure that the schedule looks professional and is age-appropriate.

## Where can I learn more about Activity Schedules?

- Virginia Commonwealth University Work Support website: <http://www.worksupport.com/>

- Virginia Commonwealth University Autism Center for Excellence website: <http://www.vcuautismcenter.org/>
- National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorder website: <http://autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/national-professional-development-center-autism-spectrum-disorder>
- OCALI Autism Internet Modules website: <http://www.autisminternetmodules.org/>

## References

- Banda, D. R., Grimmer, E., & Hart, S. L. (2009). Activity schedules: Helping students with autism spectrum disorders in general education classrooms manage transition issues. *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 41(4), 16-21.
- Carson, K. D., Gast, D. L., & Ayres, K. M. (2008). Effects of a photo activity schedule book on independent task changes by students with intellectual disabilities in community and school job sites. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 23(3), 269-279.
- Duttlinger, C., Ayres, K. M., Beville-Davis, A., & Douglas, K. H. (2013). The effects of a picture activity schedule for students with intellectual disability to complete a sequence of tasks following verbal directions. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 28(1), 32-43.
- Ganz, J. B. (2007). Classroom structuring methods and strategies for children and youth with autism spectrum disorders. *Exceptionality*, 15(4), 249-260.
- Knight, V., Sartini, E., & Spriggs, A. D. (2015). Evaluating visual activity schedules as evidence-based practice for individuals with autism spectrum disorders. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 45(1), 157-178.
- National Autism Center. (2015). Findings and conclusions: National standards project, phase 2 – Addressing the need for evidence based practice guidelines for autism spectrum disorder. Retrieved from <http://www.nationalautismcenter.org/national-standards-project/phase-2/>
- National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorder (2015). Evidence-based practices. Retrieved from <http://autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/evidence-based-practices>
- Watanabe, M., & Sturmey, P. (2003). The effect of choice-making opportunities during activity schedules on task engagement of adults with autism. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 33(5), 535-538.

