When Your Child's Brain Needs to See the Plan

Planning and Tools Companion

Use this alongside the main guide. Start with Tool 1 to figure out where to start, then go directly to the worksheet for the support type you're building.

Little
Brains & Bodies

TOOL 1: Where Do I Start?

Most families have more than one moment that could use support. Pick just one to start with —the moment that's hardest most consistently. Get one thing working before adding anything else.

1

Which moment is hardest most consistently?

Morning routine · After school arrival · Homework time · Bedtime · Mealtimes · Leaving the house · Transitions between activities

2

When things fall apart in that moment, what does it look like?

Forgetting steps they know · Freezing when asked to choose · Meltdown when switching activities · Not understanding how much time they have · All of the above

3

What does your child struggle with specifically?

Remembering the sequence of steps · Making decisions without shutting down · Shifting from one thing to the next · Abstract time (five minutes means nothing)

TOOL 1: Where Do I Start?

If this moment is hard...	And what breaks down is...	Start with this support
Morning routine / bedtime / any multi-step routine	Forgetting steps they know. Starting step one fine, then losing the thread.	Visual schedule → Tool 2
Any moment with a choice	Freezing, shutting down, or taking so long you end up choosing for them.	Choice board → Tool 3
Switching between activities	Meltdown or resistance when asked to stop one thing and start another.	Transition support → Tool 4
Open-ended tasks or any transition	No sense of how much time they have. Five minutes means nothing.	Add a visual timer alongside Tool 2 or 4
Multiple moments in the same routine	It's not one thing—the whole morning falls apart.	Quick-start package → Tool 6

If you checked multiple boxes in Question 2: that's common. Start with the breakdown that happens earliest in the routine—fixing upstream usually reduces what comes after.

TOOL 2: Visual Schedule Worksheet

For when they know the routine but still lose the thread while doing it

Part A: Map the Routine

Which routine are you building this for?

Time of day (affects how much capacity is available):

- Morning (still coming online—keep it simple)
- After school (depleted—fewer steps, more visuals)
- Evening / Bedtime (winding down—predictability matters most)
- Other: _____

Break the routine into specific steps (what actually happens, in order): *Aim for 5–7 steps. If you have more than 8, combine some. If fewer than 4, this moment may not need a visual schedule.*

EXAMPLE — *one parent's response. Yours doesn't need to look like this.*

Routine: Morning (preschool days) — Morning (still coming online—keep it simple)

Step	What happens	Image idea
1	Wake up / come downstairs	*photo of the stairs from the bottom*
2	Use the bathroom	*photo of our toilet (had to explain this one to my husband)*
3	Get dressed	*photo of two outfit options laid out on the bed*
4	Eat breakfast	*photo of her usual spot at the table*
5	Brush teeth	*photo of her toothbrush in the holder*
6	Shoes + backpack	*photo of the hooks by the door*

Built-in choice: step 3—two outfits. I pick both, she picks which one.
(I also tried adding "make bed" but that was a step too far for 6:45am honestly)

TOOL 2: Visual Schedule Worksheet
Part B: Design Decisions

Creation Method

Choose the one you'll actually do in the next 48 hours.

- Phone photos of your actual items (fastest, most effective for most kids)
- Simple drawings (no skill required—clarity beats artistry)
- Digital template (good for routines you'll update regularly)
- Hybrid (mix of the above)

Interaction Level

- Static (just look at it)
- Checkboxes (dry erase marker on laminated version)
- Physical movement (velcro pieces, flip cards, clothespin slides to current step)

Location

Where will your child's eyes actually be during this routine? *Not where it looks nice. Where they actually look. A schedule at adult eye level is invisible to a six-year-old.*

Age-Appropriate Level

Ages 3–6	Ages 7–11	Ages 12+
Photos only, or photos with one-word labels. Max 5 steps.	Photos or simple drawings plus short text. Up to 7 steps.	Mostly text, maybe icons. Help them create it—buy-in is the whole game at this age.

Before You Hang It

Check for visual clutter:

- One image or piece of information per step
- High contrast (image stands out from background)
- Text is at or below their reading level
- No competing images or decorations that distract_

> The first version won't be perfect. That's expected. Hang it, use it for a week, then adjust. Go to Tool 5 to track what you notice.

TOOL 3: Choice Board Worksheet

For when deciding feels harder than it should

Part A: Identify the Decision

Which decision is this board for?

- Breakfast / food choices
- Clothing options
- After-school break activities
- Homework break activities
- Bedtime book or song
- Other: _____

When does the shutdown happen? (Circle one)

As soon as the question is asked / After a long pause / After trying to answer and getting overwhelmed

How many options can your child handle without overwhelm?

- 2 (start here if they regularly freeze or shut down)
- 3–4 (once 2 is working consistently)
- More than 4 (probably doesn't need this board—they can handle the decision already)

If you're not sure, start with 2. You can always add more later.

EXAMPLE — one parent's response. Yours doesn't need to look like this.

Breakfast / food choices
When does it happen: as soon as the question is asked. Sometimes before I even finish asking. She just crumples.
2 options
Notes: I also tried clothing but honestly breakfast was causing more chaos so I started there. One thing at a time.

TOOL 3: Choice Board Worksheet
Part B: The Options

List your options and the image you'll use for each: *Use photos of your actual items whenever possible. Their real cereal box. Their actual breakfast items. Recognition is instant— no translation required.*

#	Option (what it is)	Image (photo of actual item, or what you'll draw)
1		
2		
3		
4		

EXAMPLE — one parent's response. Yours doesn't need to look like this.

#	Option	Image
1	Waffles	*photo of the waffle box from our freezer*
2	Yogurt with granola	*photo of the actual bowl I make (she wanted a photo of the finished bowl, not the container)*

I laminated two index cards and put a piece of velcro on the back. When she picks one, she takes it off the fridge and holds it. Seems to help her commit.
Starting with 2. Not adding more until this is working consistently. (Previous me would have added 4 immediately. This is growth.)

TOOL 3: Choice Board Worksheet
Part C: Design Decisions

Format

- Side-by-side cards (for 2 options)
- Row of cards (for 3–4 options)
- Grid (for 4 options— only if they handle options without overwhelm)

Interaction

- Parent points to board when asking the question (instead of asking verbally)
- Child points to their choice
- Child picks up the card and places it in a "my choice" spot
- Child removes other options (leaves only their choice visible)

Location

Where will this live? (Should be in the space where the decision happens)

Breakfast board on the fridge. Clothing board in the bedroom or closet. Break activity board at the homework spot.

Conditional Board? (Optional)

If your child needs different options in different conditions, add a condition label at the top of each column.

Example: "If I have big energy" / "If I need quiet" — or — "School day" / "Weekend"

- No—same options always apply
- Yes—condition 1: _____ / condition 2: _____

📝 When you introduce it: point to the board instead of asking the question verbally. "Pick one" while gesturing is often enough. Don't explain the whole system. Just use it.

TOOL 4: Transition Support Worksheet

For when switching activities costs more than it should

Part A: Map the Transition

What transition is this for?
What is your child leaving? (The hard part is almost always the leaving, not the arriving)
What is your child moving toward?

When does it typically fall apart?

- The moment you announce the transition
- When the clock runs out / time is up
- During the actual physical movement between spaces
- After the transition—they arrive at the next thing still dysregulated

How much warning time does this child actually need?

- A lot (10+ minutes, multiple reminders, visual countdown)
- Moderate (5 minute warning, one reminder)
- Very little (warnings make it worse—they just wait anxiously)

If you're not sure, start with more warning than you think is necessary. You can always reduce.

EXAMPLE — *one parent's response. Yours doesn't need to look like this.*

Transition: leaving the playground to come home for dinner
Leaving: the swings / whatever she's in the middle of
Moving toward: walking home, then dinner
When it falls apart: The moment I announce the transition AND when the clock runs out / time is up. (Both, honestly. The announcement causes immediate resistance and then when time is actually up it escalates further.)
A lot of warning time—10+ minutes. *I tried 5-minute warnings for a while. Wasn't enough. 10 minutes + 5 minutes + "one more turn" is actually what we need.*

TOOL 4: Transition Support Worksheet

Part B: Choose Your Structure

Basic First-Then-Next

Three boxes. One image per box. Shows where you are, what's coming immediately, and what's after that.

Best for: younger children, straightforward transitions, when the issue is not knowing what comes next.

FIRST (right now)	THEN (immediate next)	NEXT (what comes after)

Countdown Transition

Time markers counting down to the moment of switching. Always include what comes after.

Best for: children who need to see the time reducing. Pair with a visual timer if possible.

Time marker	What happens / what to do
10 minutes:	
5 minutes:	
2 minutes:	
NOW:	

TOOL 4: Transition Support Worksheet
Part B: Choose Your Structure (Con't.)

Bridge Transition (for the hardest switches)

Four stages visible at once. The middle step matters most—it acknowledges that disengagement has a cost and gives the nervous system a moment to process it.

Best for: significant difficulty with screen-to-anything, deep-play-to-dinner, or any transition that regularly ends in meltdown.

NOW	TRANSITION STEP	NEXT	AFTER THAT

The transition step can be: three deep breaths, saying goodbye out loud to the activity, one final look, a body shake, or any brief regulatory moment that fits your child. The point is that it's built in, not improvised.

EXAMPLE — *one parent's response. Yours doesn't need to look like this.*

My First-Then-Next for the playground:

FIRST	THEN	NEXT
Finish one more turn on the swings	Wave goodbye to the playground, walk to the gate together	Dinner—she gets to pick her cup color

The "say goodbye to the playground" step sounds silly but it actually helps. She needs a ritual to close the experience. I learned this the hard way.
The cup color at dinner is tiny but it matters—she has something to move toward, not just something to leave.

TOOL 4: Transition Support Worksheet

Part C: Adding a Visual Timer

If your child doesn't understand how much time "five minutes" actually is—which most young children genuinely don't—a visual timer makes time concrete.

- Sand timer (visible, no alarm—good for children who find alarms startling)
- Time Timer or color-change clock (shows time reducing visually)
- Standard digital timer (use only if the alarm doesn't create its own stress)
- Timer as a parent tool only—you watch it, they don't (if watching creates anxiety)

What always comes after this transition? (Write it here so it's in the support every time)
The bridge to what's next is often the piece that makes the transition actually work. Their brain needs somewhere to move toward, not just something to move away from.

My implementation plan:
I will create this by: _____
I will introduce it by: _____
Amount of warning time I'll build in: _____

> 🗒 One thing to watch: if you've been doing countdown warnings and they still melt down when time is up, the issue may be the alarm or the abruptness—not the amount of warning. A bridge transition with a built-in regulatory step often helps more than more minutes of warning.

TOOL 5: Tracking What's Working

One sheet. Use it for a month. It tells you everything you need to know.

> 🗒 The goal here is noticing patterns, not grading performance. Some days will be harder regardless. You're looking for the overall trend over time—not day-by-day pass/fail.

EXAMPLE — *one parent's response. Yours doesn't need to look like this.*

Support tracking: Morning visual schedule (bathroom mirror)
Date started: Monday of last week
Located: bathroom mirror at her eye level

Week	Used it?	What worked?	What didn't?	Adjusting
Week 1	With a prompt	She loved moving the velcro. Wanted to do it herself every time.	She still needed me to say "check the chart" between steps. Didn't look on her own yet.	Keep going as-is
Week 2	On their own (3 out of 5 days)	Fewer reminders from me. She'd walk in and just go to the chart.	Hard days still hard. But hard days used to be ALL days so honestly fine.	Add breakfast choice board at the same time next week

After Four Weeks

Clearly helping	**Helping some days but not others**	**Not helping**	**Working so well they barely need it**
Keep it going	Add more flexibility (see adjustment questions below)	Try a different support type or go back to observation	Try removing it and see what happens

TOOL 6: Quick-Start Packages & How Supports Change Over Time

Some routines have multiple places where things break down—the morning isn't just about forgetting steps, it's also about not being able to choose breakfast, and the transition from playing to getting dressed. These packages are starting points, not prescriptions. Use what fits, skip what doesn't.

Morning Routine Package

- Visual schedule: 7 steps (wake → leave)
- Choice board: 2–3 breakfast options
- Choice board: 2 clothing options (pre-selected the night before)
- Timer: 5-minute warning before leaving
- Transition support: from waking to bathroom (for kids who stall here)

Morning schedule: bathroom wall at child eye level · Breakfast choices: on the refrigerator or kitchen counter · Clothing choices: in the bedroom or on the closet door · Timer: visible from wherever they eat breakfast · Transition support: wherever they are when they wake up (bedroom doorway or bedside)

After-School Transition Package

- Transition support: from school mode to home mode (starts at the door)
- Choice board: 2–3 snack options ready and visible
- Visual sequence: unpack and settle (backpack → snack → decompression → homework)
- Timer: decompression window before homework begins

Transition support: near the entrance or mudroom—they see it the moment they walk in · Snack choices: kitchen counter, already out · Unpack sequence: by where the backpack lands · Timer: at the homework space or kitchen

Bedtime Routine Package

- Visual schedule: full bedtime sequence
- Transition support: from active play to calm-down (the hardest switch of the day)
- Choice board: books or songs
- Timer: bath and tooth-brushing

Schedule: bathroom wall · Transition support: in the path from play area to bedroom · Book or song choices: in the bedroom · Timer: in the bathroom

Homework Time Package

- Transition support: from after-school decompression to homework
- Visual breakdown: the specific homework task broken into steps
- Choice board: break activity options
- Timer: work period and break period

Transition support: wherever decompression happens · Task breakdown: at the homework spot · Break choices: at the homework spot · Timer: visible from where they work

How These Supports Typically Change Over Time

This is worth knowing before you start—because watching it happen is often how you know the support worked.

Support type	Early on	A few months in	Eventually
Visual schedule	Child looks at every step, may need prompting to check it	Glances rather than reads—internalizing the sequence	Doesn't look at it but can describe the steps. May no longer need it.
Choice board	Needs the board to decide. May still take time.	Decision gets faster. May start suggesting their own options.	Makes the decision independently and quickly. Board is no longer needed.
Transition support	Needs full countdown and bridge every time.	Fewer reminders needed. Can handle shorter warnings.	Transitions with a single verbal warning. May self-monitor.

The timeline varies a lot. Some children internalize supports in a few months. Others need them for years. Both are completely normal. The goal isn't to remove the support as quickly as possible—it's to give the developing system what it needs for as long as it needs it.

Signs a Support Is Ready to Fade

→ Child consistently completes the routine without referencing it

→ Child corrects themselves without looking at the support

→ Removing it for a week doesn't change how the routine goes

How to fade: Remove it for a trial week. Watch what happens. If the routine holds, the support has done its job. If things fall apart, bring it back—there's no penalty for needing it longer.

> The support isn't the goal. Reduced friction is the goal. If you're seeing smoother routines, fewer repeated instructions, less friction—it's working, even if your child never once looks at the schedule unprompted.

> Function beats perfection. The simplest thing that actually gets used helps more than the elaborate thing sitting unused.

> And you're not creating dependence. You're giving a developing executive function system external support while internal organization builds. The wall becomes the mental checklist. That's the whole point.

My First Support

I'm starting with:

- Tool 2 (Visual Schedule)
- Tool 3 (Choice Board)
- Tool 4 (Transition Support)
- Tool 6 (Quick-Start Package)

I'll have it up by: ____
I'll check in on how it's going on: ____

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This resource is here to help you make sense of what you're noticing — how your child's brain and body are working together in different moments. It's grounded in neuroscience research and shaped for real family life.

This is educational, not medical or therapeutic advice. If you have concerns about your child's development, behavior, or wellbeing, always speak to your pediatrican.

Every child is different, and you know yours best. Take what helps, leave what doesn't, and trust your growing understanding of what your child needs.

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