

Creating Routines That Actually Work

Simple, realistic routines and visual strategies to reduce stress, build independence and make daily life easier for everyone.

Families are often told that children with ADHD “need routine”. That can be true, but it can also sound painfully simple when mornings, homework, meals, leaving the house and bedtime already feel like a sequence of reminders. A routine only helps when the child can actually access it. If it depends on remembering several steps, noticing time passing, resisting distractions and shifting smoothly between activities, the routine itself may be asking for the very executive-function skills the child finds difficult.

The goal is not a perfectly organised home. A useful routine removes some of the thinking, remembering and negotiating from a repeated part of the day. It should support real family life, including tired mornings, difficult school days, siblings, work commitments and days when things simply do not go to plan.

Why ordinary routines can become difficult

What happens	Possible difficulty	Change the environment
“Get ready” leads nowhere	The instruction contains several hidden steps and relies on working memory.	Make the steps visible and give one clear starting point.
Everything takes much longer than expected	Time may not feel concrete until urgency arrives.	Use visible timers, countdowns and consistent transition cues.
The same item is forgotten every day	Knowing something matters does not guarantee it stays active in working memory.	Give important items one visible, permanent home near where they are needed.
A routine works for three days then disappears	Novelty fades, the system is too complicated or it requires too much adult maintenance.	Simplify it. Keep only the parts that genuinely reduce effort.

Build the routine around the difficult point

Instead of creating a beautiful ten-step chart first, observe where things actually fall apart. Is getting dressed fine but finding shoes impossible? Does homework begin but stall because equipment is scattered? Does bedtime become difficult at the transition away from a preferred activity? Support the bottleneck. A small change at the right point can be more useful than redesigning the entire day.

Put memory into the environment

A child should not have to keep every responsibility inside their head. Hooks by the door, a school basket, a laminated sequence, pictures, alarms, labelled drawers or a checklist can act as external working memory. This is not “cheating” or creating dependence. Adults use calendars, phone reminders and lists for exactly the same reason: the environment can carry information so the brain does not have to hold everything at once.

Make routines easier to follow

The best routine is often the one with the least friction. Reduce unnecessary decisions, place items where they are used and make the next action obvious. If the child repeatedly walks upstairs for something and becomes distracted, consider whether that item can live downstairs. If shoes are always lost, ask whether there is one easy drop-zone rather than repeatedly reminding the child to “put them away properly” somewhere they rarely remember.

Keep it short

Start with three or four essential steps. A visual routine that is too detailed can become another overwhelming task.

Make it visible

Use words, pictures or both according to the child's needs. Put the prompt where the routine actually happens.

Use anchors

Attach a new action to something that already happens reliably: after breakfast, before the game, when the school bag reaches the door.

Plan for imperfect days

Create a minimum version. On a difficult morning, what absolutely needs to happen and what can be dropped?

Morning routines

Prepare what genuinely helps the night before, but do not create an evening routine so demanding that it simply moves the conflict. Clothes in one place, a packed bag near the exit and breakfast choices reduced to a manageable number can lower morning decision-making. Work backwards from the leaving time and make time visible. If a child repeatedly loses track while dressing, a short visual sequence in the bedroom may be more effective than reminders shouted from another room.

Homework and after-school routines

Many children need recovery time before moving from school demands into home demands. Build the decompression period into the routine rather than treating it as a failure to begin homework immediately. Decide together what signals the end of the break. Keep homework equipment accessible and consider short work periods with movement between them. A predictable rhythm can reduce negotiation without pretending every afternoon will be identical.

Bedtime routines

Bedtime often combines several difficult skills: stopping a preferred activity, noticing time, completing hygiene tasks, slowing the body and tolerating separation from stimulation. Begin the transition before the desired sleep time. Use the same few cues where possible and reduce stimulating decisions late in the sequence. If sleep itself is persistently difficult, discuss this with an appropriate healthcare professional rather than assuming the routine alone is the problem.

Design a routine for your real family

Choose one part of the day. Build it around what actually happens in your home, not what an ideal routine is supposed to look like. Involve your child where possible; children are more likely to use a system that makes sense to them.

Routine we want to make easier	_____
Where it usually breaks down	_____
Three essential steps only	_____
What can become visual?	_____
What can have one permanent home?	_____
What transition warning will we use?	_____
Our minimum version for difficult days	_____
What will tell us the routine is helping?	_____

When the routine stops working

Do not assume the child has become lazy or that you have failed. Ask what changed. Is the chart no longer noticeable? Has the child outgrown the pictures? Is there too much on it? Has school become more demanding? Is everyone tired? A routine is a tool, not a rule. Change it when it stops doing its job.

Building independence gradually

Independence is not created by suddenly removing support. Once a routine becomes familiar, transfer one piece at a time. A parent might initially point to the checklist, later ask the child to check it independently, and eventually let the child redesign it. The aim is for the system to belong increasingly to the child, while recognising that needing external supports can remain a perfectly valid way of managing ADHD.

A message for parents

If your family has tried routines before and they have fallen apart, that does not mean routines cannot help. It may simply mean the system asked too much of the people it was meant to support. Start smaller. Remove friction. Make information visible. Keep what works and discard what does not. A routine should give your family some breathing space, not become another standard everyone feels they are failing to meet.

Further reading and guidance

Useful starting points include NHS information about ADHD, NICE guideline NG87 on attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and ADHD Foundation resources for parents and carers. Parents may also find *Smart but Scattered* by Peg Dawson and Richard Guare helpful when thinking about executive-function supports. This resource is educational and does not replace individual medical, psychological, educational or safeguarding advice.

Space to Breathe Therapy

ADHD Parent Support Series - Part 4