

Supporting Organisation and Everyday Routines

Helping everyday life feel more manageable through simple routines, visible systems and realistic expectations.

Organisation is not one single skill. Getting through an ordinary morning can require a child to remember what needs doing, notice time passing, move between tasks, find belongings, ignore distractions, decide what comes first and keep going until the sequence is complete. For a child with ADHD, several of those executive-function demands may be difficult at the same time.

This is why a child can know the routine and still not carry it out independently every day. Repeating the instruction more loudly does not necessarily make the information easier to hold. A more useful approach is often to move some of the organising out of the child's head and into the environment.

When routines keep breaking down

What you may see	What may be happening	What may help
Needs reminding about the same steps every day	The routine has not become automatic, or working memory is overloaded by other demands.	Use a short visible sequence placed where the routine happens.
Gets dressed but forgets everything else	Completing one task may cause the next step to disappear from mind.	Use a clear 'what next?' cue rather than relying on verbal memory.
Always loses shoes, bag or equipment	Items do not have one obvious home, or the storage system requires too many decisions.	Create a simple launch point near the door with one place for essential items.
Routine works some days but not others	Capacity changes with sleep, stress, sensory load, illness, hunger and emotional demands.	Have a normal routine and a shorter minimum routine for lower-capacity days.
Argues whenever prompted	The child may already feel criticised, interrupted or controlled by constant adult reminders.	Let the visual or checklist carry more of the prompting and involve the child in designing it.

Make the routine visible

A routine can be represented with words, photographs, symbols, tick boxes, objects, a whiteboard or a phone reminder depending on the child's age and preference. Keep it short. A five-step routine that is actually used is more valuable than a beautiful fifteen-step chart that becomes visual wallpaper.

Design the environment to do some of the remembering

Put the toothbrush where it is seen, the school checklist beside the bag, the laundry basket where clothes actually come off and the homework equipment together. Good organisation often means reducing the number of times the child has to remember to remember.

Building routines that survive real family life

A routine should make life easier, not become another standard everyone fails to meet. Start with the part of the day that repeatedly costs the family the most energy. Change one bottleneck, test it and then decide whether another part needs attention.

Morning	Prepare what can be prepared the night before. Keep the morning sequence visible and reduce non-essential choices during the busiest period.
After school	Include recovery before expecting another long sequence of demands. Snack, movement, quiet or changing clothes may be part of the routine.
Homework	Create one predictable starting place, make the first action obvious and keep equipment together. Avoid turning the entire evening into homework.
Bedtime	Use a familiar sequence and reduce decision-making as tiredness increases. A shorter 'late night' version can prevent an imperfect evening becoming chaos.

Use 'one home' for important things

Frequently lost essentials benefit from a single, obvious home. The location needs to fit the family's real behaviour rather than an idealised version of it. If everyone drops bags by the door, build the system there. If shoes never make it upstairs, do not make upstairs storage the condition for being organised.

Reduce decision fatigue

Repeated small choices can slow a routine down. Where it helps, simplify: a small breakfast choice, clothes prepared in advance, a standard place for forms, a fixed homework equipment box or a regular point in the week for checking school requirements. Structure should create breathing room, not remove the child's voice.

When prompting becomes conflict

If every routine depends on an adult repeating instructions, both parent and child can become frustrated. Try shifting from repeated verbal prompting to a neutral cue: point to the checklist, use an agreed alarm or ask 'What's next on your plan?' At first the adult may still need to stay nearby. Independence grows gradually as the system becomes familiar.

School routines and home routines

Children may manage routines differently across settings. Ask school which organisational supports already work and whether important information can be made clearer or more consistent. For significant difficulties, practical support might include visual timetables, written task steps, equipment prompts or staged reminders, depending on the child's individual needs.

Create an Everyday Routine That Works

Choose one routine. Do not try to redesign mornings, school, homework and bedtime on the same day. Build the smallest system that reduces the most friction.

The routine we want to make easier	_____
Which part usually breaks down first?	_____
What does my child currently have to remember?	_____
What can we make visible?	_____
Can anything be prepared earlier?	_____
Can important items have one obvious home?	_____
What adult prompts could the system replace?	_____
What is our minimum version for difficult days?	_____
What can my child already do independently?	_____
What will we change after trying it for a week?	_____

Independence is using the right support

Independence does not require a child to keep every routine in their head. Adults use calendars, lists, alarms and designated places because external systems work. The goal is for the child to become increasingly able to recognise what support they need, use it and adapt it as life changes.

A message for parents

If your child needs the same reminder every day, that is information. Instead of asking why they still have not remembered, ask what could carry the remembering for them. Sometimes the most effective ADHD support is ordinary: a hook, a basket, a timer, a three-line list and a little less talking during the busiest part of the day.

Further reading and guidance

Useful starting points include NHS information about ADHD, NICE guideline NG87 and ADHD Foundation resources for parents and carers. *Smart but Scattered* by Peg Dawson and Richard Guare offers further practical ideas for supporting executive-function skills. This resource is educational and does not replace individual medical, psychological, educational or safeguarding advice.

Space to Breathe Therapy

ADHD Parent Support Series - Part 13