

Coronavirus Survival Guide for Parents: Structure

Understanding Structure

Structure in our daily lives is critical to helping children to be productive, stay calm and emotionally regulated. A structured environment is one that is organized and predictable, which is essential right now in a world which seems unpredictable and frightening.

In a structured environment, your child knows what to expect.

When your child has day-to-day routines and a schedule to follow, this creates structure in their lives. Consistent house rules, expectations, and consequences that are clearly understood by your child (and positively reinforced by you) help maintain a predictable environment. This knowledge creates a sense of security, which is why most children benefit from structure; this is especially true if your child has a developmental disability, mood disorder or ADHD.

Setting Up Rules and Routines

Routines make life more predictable and normally a good chunk of your children's days are taken up with school and activities, which they will no longer be participating in for the foreseeable future. In addition to causing distress about missing a given activity as well as the socialization involved, it also opens up large amounts of time which now need to be scaffolded by you as their parents and caretakers.

Children often struggle with the ability to regulate themselves and exert 'self-control'. As a result they need more external control, i.e. structure, in order to function at their best. Children may find it challenging to stop certain behaviors and keep their focus on school work or 'less-preferred tasks' when there are so many distractions at home pulling them in different directions. By implementing structure and external controls at home, you are helping your child to experience more successes and also teaching them good habits and skills along the way. With structure, children learn to set aside the same block of time to complete their homework or to establish a bedtime and morning routine.

I. Have Clear Expectations and House Rules

Make rules and expectations simple, concise and clear. Your children should be a part of this process and there should be built in 'Flex-time' where they can choose an activity, or a site to do an activity. There may be some compromises to be made, but once they are decided, should be ***adhered to consistently*** (ie a teen that wants to have bedtime moved to 11 pm instead of 9:30pm) Make sure the rules are understood and agreed to by everyone in the home. Together, come up with specific consequences and be consistent in following through with consequences.

Helpful hints:

1. **Involve your child in discussions about rules and routine.** It will help them understand goals and teach them to accept responsibility.

2. **Give specific instructions and chunk tasks into manageable bites.** "Put away the toys on your carpet on the shelf in the closet." Be consistent — if the toys are stored on the shelf one night, they should be put there every night. Children need to know precisely what you expect.

3. **Assign tasks that your child is capable of doing on his own.** Success builds confidence. The goal is to teach your child to do things independently.

4. **Be realistic about time.** With your child, set a start time for a task such as a homework assignment, reading a book chapter, or cleaning his or her bedroom. Talk with your child about how long it should take to finish. Stay with your child until he or she gets started. Check back now and then to make sure he or she is still working. Make sure you've set aside enough time for the child to complete his homework, or do a certain chore such as washing the dishes. If the original time frame doesn't work, be flexible and restructure for the next day.

5. **Dedicate space and reorganize** during this time of 'chaos' in the outside world. Create a sense of order for your child by helping to organize his or her room. At first you may need to work with your child to get started. Once things are in place, it is important for the child to keep it up on his or her own. Dedicate a space to do homework away from distractions and turn off electronics whenever possible.

II. Write it down and use Visual Aids such as White Boards

From early morning to dinner routines to bedtime, schedules help provide consistency (important for everyone not just children). Try to keep the time that your child wakes up in the morning, eats, and goes to bed each night fairly consistent from day to day. Set up a visual daily schedule that at least vaguely imitates 'normal life', ie if your teen normally wakes up at 6am, do not let them sleep until noon every day and stay up until 1 am.

1. Use a Family Calendar

A family calendar organizes all the information for the household in one centralized location where everyone can see and use it. Write important times, including times when everyone is going to be together such as dinnertime. Put important dates on the calendar and remind everyone to refer to it often. Get the children involved---use a host of colors on the whiteboard, and if they do something let them draw a happy face, a heart, whatever to signal to you that they have done it.

2. Use Personal reminders in a way that will work for your child

If your child uses a cell phone or smartphone, consider using the calendar, alarm, or timer to set reminders. If your child uses e-mail, he or she might want to send e-mail reminders to himself or herself. Reminders might include after-school activities, homework, due dates for library books, or even a reminder to start a task.

3. Breakdown routines as sequences of tasks

Chunking things in to more manageable chunks is a good way to help children feel capable and like they can do it, rather than overwhelmed by a huge list or amorphous expectations. Write things succinctly (two to five items only), and post where easily visible. Make sequences or lists portable so they can be moved around as needed (refrigerator, bathroom mirror). Review lists regularly with your child and have them get involved in making them.

3. **Allow for free time in daily routines.** Children — and adults — need downtime. Make it fun---let them add in a ‘mystery break’ and plan on doing something new of different. If your child is looking forward to an enjoyable activity, have him or her finish a less enjoyable activity first. We call this alternating ‘preferred’ and ‘non-preferred’ tasks. Reward on-task time by following it with preferred-task time. Set the amount of time based on the child’s age and stamina. For example, you could list: complete 5 math problems, take a 5-minute break, and so on.

III-Reward Positive Behavior

Reward positive behavior and praise your child’s efforts. Positive reinforcement can be powerful because it teaches children the behaviors that you want to see. This helps shape your child’s behavior in a positive way. Be positive and be patient! It takes time to change old habits and form new ones.

1. It may help to use a reward system that gives positive reinforcement each time your child follows through on a tough task. Offer an activity that he or she likes, such as more TV time or going out to the park. Talk about rewards and ask your child to make suggestions of his or her own. Giving them a choice always helps to motivate them, and gives them the illusion of control.
2. Do not agree to rewards that disrupt your child’s daily routine. If the rule is no computer before homework, do not offer computer time before homework as a reward.
3. **Praise effort — not just results.** If your child set the table but forgot napkins, acknowledge that she’s trying. Reward good behavior more often and catch them being good and give positive reinforcement.