

Tips to Support Young Children with Developmental Disabilities During a Confusing Time

Young children with developmental disabilities may be more anxious if their routine changes or they find themselves in a new situation. They might act-out, cry, yell, or not behave as maturely as usual. These suggestions can help you to reassure them and return some order to their days and nights.

Make routines even when there is no schedule.

- Try to have set routines so that children know what to expect during the day. If you cannot control the schedule, then try to have some little things you do at certain times. For example, when the child wakes up, you can sing a little good morning song (“You are my sunshine, my only sunshine. You make me happy when skies are gray. . .”). Or, you might play peek-a-boo with the blanket. Or, you might fold the blanket in a particular way and put it in the same place.
- When the schedule is confusing, and the child is not sure what is happening next, reassure the child by saying something like, “I don’t know what we will do next. But I DO know this: It is TIME FOR A TICKLE!”
- Try to have nighttime routines that you do, no matter what time bedtime comes. For example, sing the same lullaby every night, whether you are going to sleep at home or on a bus. Young children with developmental disabilities find comfort in these routines, because they are the same every day.
- If a daily routine or schedule must change, explain the change in simple words. For example, “We are having lunch in a different room today.”

Use make-believe.

- Little silly stories that you make up can be very comforting. To make them more like a routine, always begin them with, “Once upon a time, there was a little boy named (name the child). And everyone just l-o-v-e-d him.” Then make up a little story about something happy that happened to the child. Or, make up a silly story about food. “Once upon a time, a boy was eating a meatball. Then the meatball began to roll away. It went all the way down the road! Then it rolled into a store!”
- If the child has a make-believe friend, ask her to tell you about her make-believe friend. Pretend with her.

- If the child does not have a make-believe friend, you can invent one! Cup your hand and pretend that there is a little bird or frog or bear in your hand. Pretend that you are talking to the little make-believe animal. Ask the child, "What will we call this little pretend friend?"
- Young children often enjoy whispering. Try this: "I am going to whisper a silly idea in your ear. It will be so silly. Then you can tell me a silly word." Then whisper something that sounds silly, like "I saw a big brown bird on the bus. And the bird was eating a banana!"

Use play.

- If the child is acting out, remain calm, do not raise your voice, and do not engage in a lot of talking. You can say short sentences such as, "You are mad. I know. It is hard to be here. I will wait for you. Soon you will calm down. Then we can play."
Just wait until the child is ready to talk and has taken a break from the acting-out behavior. Direct him to an activity or a toy that he likes. Leading a child to something they like may take the child's mind off what is bothering her.
- Try to find out from parents or others what the child likes to do. If the child can tell you, ask him/her what they like to do, what books they like to read, or what toys they like. Favorite items and activities will reassure the child, because they are familiar.
- Doing an activity that involves using their hands and body can help children work through their own problems. Try an art activity or working with clay, doing puzzles, doing physical activities like running, jumping, playing ball, or using a swing set.
- Give children something to keep that they can call their very own, such as a stuffed animal or a toy safe for their age. Pretend that the stuffed animal or action figure is whispering to you. "He said that he was sleepy but he is NOT TAKING A NAP! What are we going to do with him?" This is an easy way to start make-believe.