



AuSM's highly trained, certified therapists have committed their careers to helping individuals with autism understand their diagnosis and address both the challenges and gifts that it can bring. The AuSM Counseling and Consulting Services team sends out a monthly email to answer questions submitted by our community. Register to receive this monthly column via email at [www.ausm.org](http://www.ausm.org).

## **Dear Therapist:**

I'm an autistic adult who also has a child with autism. We have had a lot of success with our child using visual schedules to reduce uncertainty. Unfortunately, we had a big challenge around visual schedules at a recent community program he attended. The staff let us know that if they gave him a schedule, he would become very upset when they were a minute or two late starting a scheduled activity. I can understand his frustration because I also have difficulty if things change, especially when people around me told me what to expect but then made a change. I also understand that sometimes people give approximate information instead of precise information. Staff are frustrated and my child is struggling. How can I support my child in understanding that difference – and also explain my child's needs to the people who work with him?

## **Feeling Frustrated**

### **Dear Frustrated:**

Let's start with your child. Obviously, you understand the benefits of schedules to help reduce uncertainty. Unfortunately the world is never as precise as we expect it to be. I think there are several things that might help your child.

First, explain to those working with him that times should go on the schedule only when they really mean it. If they don't know exactly when something will happen, there are other supports they can use. They could offer a simple sequence (for example, when we finish the art project we will go for a hike), or share a time range when something will happen (between 2:00 and 2:15 the snack will be delivered).



Another important tool is to have the schedule be modifiable. A dry erase board, electronic schedule, or even Velcro allows things to be easily and visually adapted.

The child should always be part of the change. Let them know that something has happened so that the schedule must change, then go with them to the schedule to physically make the change. That can help the child understand that while there has been a change, they can still see what to expect.

You might want to practice this at home, starting with positive changes, such as an unexpected fun activity when work gets done more quickly than expected.

You or a staff member can also use some techniques to help your child understand that sometimes people don't know exactly when something will happen. A good option is a social narrative. This can help a person to understand what others are thinking in a given situation.

You could use a social narrative to explain that people might say "At about 2:00 we will have snack." That usually means between 1:55 and 2:10.

Social narratives can also be helpful when there are unavoidable schedule changes (like, the bus is late due to weather, the water heater breaks and the morning shower must be skipped, etc.)

It might take some prodding and insistence to get non-autistic individuals to understand how imprecise they are being. Most neurotypicals don't notice all the small ways they say one thing but mean another. Remind them that precision and exactness are characteristics of your child's (and your) brain – and that these characteristics are often valuable traits.

A sense of humor can sometimes help if you need to repeatedly remind non-autistics that they are being vague and confusing.



Impreciseness is not only common with time, but also with a variety of other activities. We might say, “I need to make two stops on the way home,” and then realize that one store did not have an essential item, requiring a stop at a third place. A medical provider will say, “You should feel better in a day or two,” but most people understand that means anywhere from one to five days.

Even at work a boss may say, “I will get that information to you today,” but might get interrupted and not get it to you until the next day. If your brain is incredibly precise, all these situations can feel disconcerting, or even as if someone has lied to you.

As an adult you probably have some ability to adapt to uncertain situations, but they remain stressful. This is a great opportunity to teach your child self-advocacy skills that they’ll use throughout their life.

One incredibly useful skill is learning to ask for clarification, especially in situations you have misinterpreted before. You might ask others (bosses, family members, friends) “Is that an exact time or can you give me a range?” “Is that a firm list or might there be last minute changes?” or “How much better should I feel in 48 hours and when should I call back?”

Work with your child to practice identifying situations where someone is probably being general, and then asking questions until they can understand what to expect.

You can even think in terms of reasonable accommodations and find parallels for your child. For example, you certainly have the right at work to ask to be notified as soon as possible if fixed expectations change. Similarly, your child has the right to know when things change during their day.

You can also help your child practice their own flexibility skills when using visual supports. The act of looking at your visual schedule and making whatever changes are necessary can help you regain a sense of order. Practice making those changes together with your child and remind them that they can always do it on their own, too.



Finally, if your child is getting upset, you may want to help them practice some emotion regulation skills. Let them know they can take a short break to calm down if they need to, offer them fidgets or sensory items, teach them grounding or breathing techniques, or make sure they have an item or activity that helps them feel relaxed. Once you identify together what helps them regulate their emotions, remind them that they can practice those skills when their schedule changes.

For a deeper dive, we've posted a guide to flexible thinking in the [Resources](https://ausm.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Flexible-Thinking.pdf) section of AuSM's website. This resource will help you practice flexibility in dealing with change in ways that are self-directed and focused on the goals you want to reach: <https://ausm.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Flexible-Thinking.pdf>

I hope these suggestions are precise enough to be helpful.

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If you would like to submit a question for the AuSM Counseling and Consulting Services team, please e-mail [autismcounseling@ausm.org](mailto:autismcounseling@ausm.org) or contact us at 651.647.1083.