

Every Child Can Participate: Adapting Routines for Diverse Learners

What does it mean to adapt a routine?

When you adapt a routine, you are making modifications and changes that support the meaningful participation of **all** children in your Early Learning and Child Care program. These universal strategies support all children and ensure children with diverse learning needs feel a sense of belonging.

Why is it important to adapt routines?

Play time, snack time, nap time, and circle time are all examples of common routines in Early Learning and Child Care programs. Each of these routines provide many important and beneficial opportunities for children's social and emotional development and learning.

Let's use *circle time* as an example of why it is important to adapt routines and use universal strategies to support all children's development.

Without intentional planning, circle time can be difficult for children with diverse needs because children may be expected to:

- sit in a specific area close to peers
- look at the educator(s)
- use expressive and receptive language skills
- participate in activities (i.e., reviewing calendar, determining the weather, singing songs, reading stories, etc.)
- and sustain attention for longer periods of time (Barton et al., 2011)

However, when circle time is adapted to meet the needs of all learners, it can provide many important and beneficial opportunities for children with diverse needs to:

- build positive connections with peers and adults
- follow daily schedules and routines
- learn social and emotional skills like listening and turn taking



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- participate in activities that are engaging and developmentally appropriate (i.e., singing, movement, emergent literacy, etc.)
- experience a sense of belonging and citizenship

It is very important to adapt circle time to meet children's diverse needs so they can meaningfully participate and gain valuable skills that support their development. Below are some practical strategies for adapting circle time:

- **Location:** Have circle time in a quiet area with few distractions (i.e., you could use fabric or soft material to cover toy shelves).
- **Seating:** Give children choice between seats (i.e., balls, carpet squares, bean bags, pillows) – this also supports children to know where and when to sit and stand. Arrange seating so that all children can see the educator, schedule, visuals, etc.
- **Props:** Use props for songs and stories. Have enough props for all children and let children choose props (if appropriate).
- **Modelling:** Break down circle time by skill (i.e., social, communication, mobility) and activity (i.e., transition to circle, greeting song, song choices, musical instruments, weather, books, etc.) and then model how to engage and participate.
- **Monitor participation:** Follow children's interests, preferences, and provide choice. Circle is meant to be intriguing and engaging for all children.
- **Open-Ended:** Children can enter and exit circle based on their interests and engagement with activities. Provide quiet tasks that children can do if they leave circle.

(Adapted from Barton et al., 2011)

How can educators adapt routines?

Below are some practical strategies for adapting routines:

- **Consistency:** Consistent routines that happen at roughly the same time, and unfold in similar ways each day, can provide comfort and a sense of safety for children.
- **Visual Schedules:** When children know what is happening next, it gives them a sense of security. It helps them learn to trust that caring adults will provide what they need. When children feel this sense of trust and safety, they are free to play, explore, and learn. All children benefit from the use of visuals and visual schedules. You can use a picture schedule with large words so that all children can see. Many children with diverse needs have strengths in processing information visually, so communicating with visuals can make a big difference (i.e., pictures, props, gestures, etc.). You can also use "First/Then" boards and/or individualized schedules.
- **Clear Expectations:** When children know the expectations within a relationship, environment, or routine, they can meaningfully participate. Involve children in "the making, following, questioning, and re-working of rules, rituals, and procedures" (Makovichuk, Hewes, Lirette, and Thomas, 2014, p 112). Children learn best through repetition, practice, and positive experiences. When educators involve children in the daily review of shared expectations, and give children frequent reminders of expected behaviour, children grow in their understanding and confidence to participate as citizens in their classroom community.
- **Transitions:** Turn some of the lights off and consider transition strategies to help children

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move to different activities (i.e., singing a cleanup song).

- **Directions:** When giving directions, having pictures to accompany your verbal directions can help. Positively framing directions and using clear, concise language supports children's success.
- **Regulation Strategies:** The comforting presence of a caring adult can help children co-regulate throughout the day. Model and have children practice strategies for calming down, like breathing deeply or going to a cozy nook in the room.
- **Visual Prompts:** Increase communication and understanding between an educator and a child and peer interactions by creating visuals for common requests (i.e., "help," "break," and "wait").
- **Positive Attention and Acknowledgement:** Provide lots of opportunities to acknowledge children's positive interactions and their efforts throughout the day. Use forms of acknowledgement that are individualized to children, including use of nonverbal cues of appreciation such as a smile, thumbs up, gentle pat on the shoulder, etc.

References

- Barton, E., Chen, C., Reichow, B., Wolery, B. (2011) We Can all Participate! Young Exceptional Children, June (Vol. 14, No. 2). p.1-21. Retrieved from <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1096250610393681>
- Blagojevic, B., Logue, M.E., Bennett-Armistead, V.S., Taylor, B., Neal, E. (2011) Take a Look! Visual Supports for Learning. Teaching Young Children, June/July, 4(5), p. 10-13.
- Makovichuk, L., Hewes, J., Lirette, P. & Thomas, N. (2014), Flight: Alberta's early learning and care framework. Retrieved from www.flightframework.ca
- Milbourne, S., & Campbell, P. (2007). *Cara's Kit (consultant's version): Creating adaptive routines and activities*. Missoula, MT: Division for Early Childhood.

Helpful Resources for Educators

The Environment: Meeting the Needs of All Learners—Helping Staff Adapt the Learning Environment

<https://www.virtuallabschool.org/management/learning-environments/lesson-6>

Helping Children Adjust to Rules and Routines (Ages 0-6)

<https://www.scholastic.com/teachers/articles/teaching-content/ages-stages-helping-children-adjust-rules-routines/>