

## Helping your child with autism adjust to and enjoy the summer season!

Most of us look forward to summer and the changes it brings—warmer temperatures, more hours of daylight, and fun outdoor activities. But for children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD), these seasonal changes can present challenges to their carefully orchestrated daily routines.



Your son or daughter may need help dealing with the sun and the heat, embracing a new summertime routine, and adjusting to a different sleep schedule.

### **Beat the heat**

Changes in temperatures can be difficult for children on the autism spectrum. You may want to pack away favorite clothing such as sweaters and sweat suits and help your child select lightweight clothes that will help him or her stay cool and comfortable on hot summer days.

And make sure he or she stays hydrated in the heat. If your child is nonverbal, it is important to watch for signs of discomfort and dehydration.

### **Fun in the sun**

Because of increased sensitivity, children with ASD are often resistant to having sunblock applied onto their skin. If this is the case with your child, it may be helpful to have him or her engage in a preferred activity (such as watching a favorite video) while

you apply the sunscreen. If your child resists, you can pause the video until he or she complies.

### **Planning for change**

Summer can also mean changes in a child's daytime schedule. If your child attends a school that has a different summer schedule, it's important to make sure that he or she is aware of the changes that will occur. It's also important to make sure that all caregivers and service or therapy providers who work with your child during the summer months are aware of the summer schedule. Consider creating

an information sheet that gives a brief overview of important things these individuals should know about your child (likes, dislikes, allergies, common ways of communicating, etc.).

It may be helpful if you create a picture board that graphically illustrates any changes that will take place in your child's routine. Picture boards are useful for both small transitions (first wash your hands, then eat a popsicle) or for larger transitions (change into your bathing suit, apply sunscreen, get in the car, go to the pool). Review the changes/steps together before engaging in the activities, and then periodically during the activities. Try to put the picture board in a place where your child can see it at all times.

If your child has calendar skills, use them! Review the calendar periodically and talk about upcoming activities, such as a picnic or a special event, such as a family vacation. Have him or her help you write things or place stickers on the calendar so he or she will understand what will happen. If



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possible, make a brief visit to a new location before taking your child there for a longer time.

### **Rest easy**

Keep in mind that additional daylight can affect your child's sleep patterns, especially if he or she is used to staying up until it gets dark and waking up with the sun. Using blackout or darkening curtains can help keep the sunlight out so your child knows when it is time to sleep.

As is the case for all children, children with ASD become better sleepers if they have a regular bedtime routine such as bathing, brushing their teeth, and listening to a story before bed. When they have a routine, they know what to expect.

With a little advanced planning, summer can be an enjoyable time for your child with autism — and for the entire family!

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*"Helping your child with autism adjust to and enjoy the summer season!" was authored by Erica Kearney, M.A., BCBA, Program Director of the May Center School in West Springfield, Mass. Kearney's areas of interest and expertise include behavior modification, evaluating the effectiveness of restrictive procedures, and training staff and parents to use applied behavior analysis.*

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