

September Adapting Daily Schedules & The Emotional State

In CARA's KIT (Creating Adaptations for Routines and Activities), tools and strategies are organized along the Adaptation Continuum—ranging from least intrusive (environmental changes) to most intrusive (direct adult assistance).

When routine shifts or unexpected schedule disruptions occur, early childhood educators and parents can use specific tools and continuum levels from the kit to anchor children with predictability and emotional connection.

Core CARA's KIT Tools for Planning Changes

- The Adaptation Decision-Making Matrix: A step-by-step problem-solving guide used to identify the specific barrier during a routine, define the desired participation goal, and choose the least intrusive adaptation first before jumping straight to adult management.
- Adaptation Planning Notes / Forms: A collaborative communication tool for teachers, specialists, and parents. If a routine changes at home (e.g., parent travel, bedtime disruption) or school (e.g., field trip, substitute teacher), educators and families use this form to align on shared cues, transitional comfort items, and consistent phrasing.
- CARA's Mini-Posters: Quick-reference cheat sheets hung in learning areas or at home to remind adults of concrete modifications available during high-friction routines (e.g., circle time, transitions, gross motor).

Implementation Tips

- **Walk the Continuum Upward:** Start with schedule adjustments and visual materials before providing hands-on physical or verbal prompts; this preserves the child's independence.
- **Front-Load the Narrative:** Pair CARA's visual schedules with a quick social story or review at morning meeting/breakfast: *"Today our schedule has a twist. Look right here at our board: after snack, we are visiting the library instead of our centers."*

Continuum Adaptations for Predictability & Connection

Adaptation Level	Strategy for Predictability	Strategy for Connection
1. Adapt the Daily Schedule & Routine	• Insert visual "Change" markers or surprise cards onto the visual schedule board so the alteration is expected rather than sudden. • Use concrete transition warnings (e.g., a 2-minute visual sand timer or transition chime).	• Anchor the change between two highly stable, favorite routines (e.g., special read-aloud before the schedule change). • Adjust the pacing so children do not feel rushed, allowing space for unhurried check-ins.
2. Adapt the Environment	• Define safe, personal physical boundaries using carpet squares, tape lines, or personal sit-spots during unfamiliar arrangements. • Reduce sensory overload (dimming overhead lights, creating a cozy quiet corner) when an altered schedule brings extra stimulation.	• Co-create a designated "calm-down" or "reconnection" nook where a child and caregiver can sit together side-by-side.

3. Adapt the Materials	• Use "First/Then" boards or portable photo rings that children can carry during out-of-routine events (e.g., fire drills, assemblies). • Add high-contrast visual cues or object schedules (holding a ball to represent outdoor time).	• Incorporate familiar comfort objects or items of special interest (e.g., holding a favorite small figurine or tactile squish ball) to provide grounding while processing change.
4. Adapt Requirements & Instructions	• Break modified routines into smaller, manageable micro-steps rather than expecting multi-step independence. • Use photographic sequencing cards rather than purely verbal instructions.	• Offer forced choices within the changed routine (e.g., <i>"Our order changed today: do you want to wash hands first or grab your mat first?"</i>) to restore a child's sense of agency and collaboration.
5. Adapt Assistance & Peer Support	• Assign a predictable peer partner or "buddy system" during unusual transitions (e.g., walking together during a special event).	• Provide intentional adult proximity and co-regulation: position yourself at eye level, validate the frustration or confusion of the disruption, and model calm breathing before moving to the next task.