

CareCertify LLC

CareCertify Caregiver Training · Autism Spectrum Caregiving

AUT-09

Routines, Structure & Daily Living

Participant Guide

Professional Caregivers & Direct Support Professionals · A Caregiver's Guide to Autism

Updated July 2026 — best-practice & OT sources

Predictability is a kindness. Structure, visual supports, and smooth transitions help autistic people feel safe and grow independent.

Learning Objectives — by the end of this module you will be able to:

- Explain why structure and routine matter
- Use visual supports effectively
- Support smooth transitions
- Teach daily-living skills step by step
- Support independence and dignity in personal care
- Balance routine with flexibility

Section 1: Why structure and routine matter

Predictability lowers anxiety and opens the door to learning.

- **Reduces anxiety.** Knowing what's coming next makes the world feel safe; uncertainty is a major source of stress.
- **Builds independence.** Consistent routines let a person learn and eventually do steps on their own.
- **Supports success.** Structure sets people up to succeed, which builds confidence and reduces challenging behavior.
- **Not rigidity.** Structure is a support, not a cage — the goal is safety and growth, not control for its own sake.

Section 2: Visual supports

Show the day, don't just say it.

- **Visual schedule.** Pictures or words showing the sequence of the day reduce anxiety and the need for verbal reminders.
- **First-then boards.** 'First this, then that' makes expectations and rewards clear and concrete.
- **Checklists.** Step-by-step visual checklists help a person complete routines with growing independence.

Section 3: Handling transitions

Moving between activities is often the hardest part of the day.

- **Give advance warning.** Let the person know a change is coming — 'five more minutes, then lunch' — well before it happens.
- **Use a timer or countdown.** Visual timers make abstract time concrete, so the person can see the change approaching.
- **Use transition supports.** A transition object, a visual 'now/next,' or a consistent routine eases the move.

Most transition struggles come from surprise — remove the surprise and the struggle often shrinks.

Section 4: More helpful tools

Match the tool to the person.

- **Social stories.** Short, personalized stories that explain what to expect in a situation and how to handle it.
- **Timers & clocks.** Visual timers and clear time cues help with waiting, transitions, and pacing.
- **Written routines.** For readers, a written list or note can be calmer and clearer than spoken instructions.
- **Now/next boards.** Simple boards showing the current and next activity keep the day predictable in the moment.

Section 5: Teaching daily-living skills

Break big skills into small, teachable steps.

- **Task analysis.** Break a skill (like brushing teeth) into small steps and teach one at a time.
- **Prompt.** Give the least help needed — a gesture, model, or words — to help the person succeed on each step.
- **Fade prompts.** As the person masters steps, reduce your help so they do more independently.
- **Practice & patience.** Skills grow with consistent practice, encouragement, and time — celebrate each step.

Section 6: Independence and dignity in personal care

Support without taking over.

- **Protect privacy.** Respect the person's body and privacy during hygiene, dressing, and toileting.
- **Offer choices.** Choices in clothing, order, and pace give control and dignity.
- **Age-appropriate.** Support teens and adults as the age they are, not as young children.
- **Consistent routine.** A predictable personal-care routine, supported visually, builds comfort and independence.

Section 7: Building a supportive daily structure

Six ingredients of a calm, growth-friendly day.

- **Predictable schedule.** A consistent daily rhythm the person can count on.
- **Visual supports.** Schedules, checklists, and now/next boards throughout the day.
- **Consistent routines.** The same steps done the same way, across caregivers.

- **Real choices.** Meaningful choices woven through the day for control and dignity.
- **Downtime.** Built-in breaks and quiet time to rest and regulate.
- **Celebrate progress.** Notice and encourage effort and independence, not just outcomes.

Section 8: Routine plus flexibility

Predictability is the base; flexibility is a skill to grow.

- **Teach coping with change.** Gently and gradually practice small, planned changes so change becomes less threatening over time.
- **Start small.** Introduce minor variations within a safe routine, with warning and support.
- **Give coping tools.** A 'change' card, a social story about surprises, or a calm-down plan helps the person handle the unexpected.

Life will always bring change — building tolerance for it, kindly, is a gift of independence.

Section 9: Teaching a new skill, step by step

A reliable teaching sequence.

- Break the skill into small, clear steps (task analysis)
- Show or model the step
- Let the person try with the least prompt needed
- Give encouraging, specific feedback
- Fade prompts as they master each step
- Practice consistently and across settings

Consistency across all caregivers is what turns practice into a lasting skill.

Section 10: Consistency and generalization

A skill isn't learned until it works everywhere it's needed.

- **Same steps.** Every caregiver teaches the skill the same way, using the same steps and prompts.
- **Across settings.** Practice the skill in the different places it's actually needed, not just one room.
- **Team alignment.** Share the approach and progress so the whole team supports it identically.
- **Keep practicing.** Maintain skills with ongoing, low-pressure practice so they don't fade.

Section 11: Common pitfalls

Even good intentions can slip here.

- **Surprises.** Skipping the warning before a change undoes the predictability the person relies on.
- **Over-prompting.** Doing too much for the person stalls independence; fade help as they grow.
- **Rigidity for its own sake.** Routine should serve the person; don't enforce sameness that no longer helps them.

Aim for supportive structure that grows with the person — not control that holds them in place.

Apply It — Scenarios

Leaving a favorite activity

A client is deeply engaged with a tablet game, and it's time to leave for an appointment.

The right response: → Give advance warning early: 'Two more minutes, then we turn it off and go.' → Use a visual timer so the ending is visible, not a sudden surprise. → Show a now/next visual: 'Now tablet, next car,' and what happens after. → Keep the transition routine consistent every time, and acknowledge that stopping is hard.

Teaching toothbrushing

You're helping a client learn to brush their teeth more independently.

The right response: → Break it into steps: wet brush, add paste, brush top, brush bottom, rinse, done. → Use a visual checklist and model each step. → Prompt only as much as needed, and fade your help as they master steps. → Practice at the same times daily, respect sensory needs (taste, texture), and celebrate progress.

Key Terms

Term	What it means
Visual schedule	A pictured or written sequence of the day that reduces anxiety.
First-then board	A visual showing what comes first and what follows.
Transition	Moving from one activity or place to another.
Social story	A short, personalized story explaining a situation and how to handle it.
Task analysis	Breaking a skill into small teachable steps.
Prompt & fade	Giving the least help needed, then reducing it as skill grows.
Generalization	Using a learned skill across different settings and people.
Now/next board	A simple board showing the current and next activity.

Check Your Understanding

1. Structure and routine matter because they:

- A. Reduce anxiety and build independence
- B. Control the person
- C. Limit growth
- D. Are just rules

Answer: A — Predictability lowers anxiety.

2. A 'first-then' board:

- A. Confuses the person
- B. Is only for staff
- C. Sets no expectations
- D. Makes expectations and rewards clear and concrete

Answer: D — First-then clarifies expectations.

3. A 'now/next' board shows:

- A. Only the past
- B. The whole month
- C. Nothing useful
- D. The current and next activity

Answer: D — Now/next boards aid the moment.

4. Personal care should protect:

- A. Only efficiency
- B. The staff's schedule
- C. Nothing
- D. The person's privacy and dignity

Answer: D — Protect privacy in personal care.

5. Flexibility is best built by:

- A. Practicing small, planned changes gradually
- B. Forcing big changes
- C. Never changing anything
- D. Surprising the person

Answer: A — Grow flexibility gradually.

6. A common pitfall is:

- A. Fading prompts
- B. Teaching steps
- C. Over-prompting, which stalls independence
- D. Giving choices

Answer: C — Over-prompting stalls growth.

7. The best approach pairs visuals with:

- A. Sarcasm
- B. Long lectures
- C. Idioms
- D. Clear, simple words

Answer: D — Visuals + clear words.

What You Learned

- Predictability lowers anxiety, builds independence, and prevents challenging behavior
- Visual supports — schedules, first-then, checklists — show the day and reduce verbal demands
- Ease transitions with advance warning, visual timers, and now/next supports
- Teach daily-living skills with task analysis, prompting, and fading
- Support personal care with privacy, choice, age-appropriateness, and routine
- Balance routine with gently building tolerance for change
- Consistency across caregivers and settings makes skills stick

Next: AUT-10 — health, co-occurring conditions, and safety.

Legal & Training Basis

This course is caregiver education about autism spectrum disorder, developed from current, authoritative sources including the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the DSM-5-TR diagnostic framework, and peer-reviewed research. It is general education for caregivers — not medical advice, a diagnosis, or a treatment protocol. Every autistic person is an individual; caregivers should follow each person's own support plan and consult qualified professionals for medical, behavioral, and dietary decisions. Current as of July 2026.

CareCertify · caregiverceus.com · Retain this guide and your completion record in the personnel file.