



Toolkit: Routine Changes

Helping your child manage transitions, surprises, and disruptions with calm and confidence

WHAT'S INSIDE

1. Introduction
2. Why Routine Matters
3. Why Change Feels So Hard
4. Preparing for Change
5. Tools for Visual and Verbal Support
6. Building Flexibility Over Time
7. Managing Unexpected Disruptions
8. Custom Templates and Timetables
9. Further Resources

1. Introduction

Autistic children often thrive with routine. Predictability provides security, structure, and emotional safety. But life doesn't always stick to the plan, appointments run late, plans get cancelled, or new things pop up unexpectedly.

This toolkit from Barney's Box offers step-by-step support to help you and your child cope when routines shift, while building skills for flexibility at a pace that feels safe.

You can't prepare for *everything*, but you can prepare to handle it together.

2. Why Routine Matters

Routines create comfort. They remove the uncertainty that can feel overwhelming for autistic children.

They help reduce anxiety, support independence, and make the world feel more predictable.

Some children may rely heavily on:

- Rigid morning/evening routines
- Specific clothes, foods, or activities
- Consistent transport routes or caregivers
- Repeating favourite media or phrases

This is not about control - it's about *feeling safe*.



3. Why Change Feels So Hard

Change, even positive change, can cause:

- Sensory or emotional overload
- Feelings of panic or loss of control
- Behavioural changes (shutdowns, meltdowns)
- Sleep disruption or increased anxiety



Barney's Box Insight: Change isn't just new, it's *uncertain*. That's the real challenge.

4. Preparing for Change Plan

| | |
|---|--|
| Step 1: Introduce the idea early | Use a visual or verbal “heads up.” “Tomorrow we’ll go to the dentist. We’ll drive there after lunch.” |
| Step 2: Create a visual timeline | Break it into small steps with pictures or drawings. “Wake up → Breakfast → Drive |
| Step 3: Offer predictability within the change | “You can wear your favourite jumper.” “We’ll bring your tablet and your headphones.” |
| Step 4: Validate emotions | “It’s OK to feel worried. I’ll be with you the whole time.” |

5. Tools for Visual and Verbal Support

- **Now/Next Boards** – e.g. “Now: get dressed / Next: go to school”
- **Countdown Calendars** – Cross off days to help process what’s coming
- **Social Stories** – Step-by-step scripts to explore what a change will be like
- **Change Cards** – Visuals that say: “*There’s been a change to the plan*”

Download customisable templates at barneysbox.co.uk/resources

6. Building Flexibility Over Time

Small, low-stakes changes can help build tolerance gradually.

Examples of safe practice:

- Change the order of two routine steps
- Introduce a new food on a favourite plate
- Take a new route home but listen to the usual music
- Switch up pyjamas with your child’s input

Celebrate any success, even small steps are *real* progress.

“You handled that change so well, I know it was tricky.”

7. Managing Unexpected Disruptions

You can't prepare for everything, but you can prepare to *recover*.

In the moment:

1. Stay calm and use simple language:
2. "The café is closed. We're going to the shop instead."
3. Use a calming strategy, deep breaths, sensory tools, quiet time
4. Offer a preferred choice (if possible):
5. "We can have your snack in the car or at home."
6. Reflect later when everyone's calm:
7. "That didn't go as planned, but you coped so well."

Build a shared language around change:

"Plan A didn't work. Let's find a Plan B together."



8. Tools & Templates

- Visual Change Planner
- "Change Card" Symbols
- Personalised Social Story Template
- Now/Next/Then Printable Board

(Available from barneysbox.co.uk/resources)

9. Further Support

- [National Autistic Society – Visual Supports](#)
- Local SEN support workers or early help teams



Barney's Tip: Print and stick planners, checklists and trackers somewhere visible, or use digitally. Choose what feels right.

10. Final Thoughts

Your child is not “rigid.” They are doing their best to cope with a world that often feels unpredictable.

And so are you.

Every time you prepare them with patience, support them through the wobbles, and celebrate the small wins, you're creating *security* in a changing world.

Barney's Box is here to help you handle the hard days, one gentle step at a time.
You've got this. We've got you.

The Barney's Box Team

www.barneysbox.co.uk