Individual Schedule and Environment Adaptations

Schedules and routines in your program need to be sensitive to all the children and youth enrolled, especially those with special needs. Read the scenario below and answer the questions. Then share your responses with your supervisor.

Jillian, a 9-year-old in your school-age program, has special emotional and behavioral needs. Your program is set up such that children and youth arrive in groups based upon their school release time, and typically about 15 to 20 children arrive together, check in, put their things away, wash their hands, and go to the choice board to choose where to start their afternoon. Since the start of the school year, you have noticed that Jillian consistently becomes agitated during this arrival time—she has yelled loudly at other children if they remind her she has not washed her hands, she has thrown her belongings when staff members remind her she must put them away before selecting an activity, she has tried to hit children who accidentally touch her while putting their belongings away, she has pushed other children while waiting in line to sign-in. Jillian seems to become particularly distressed if the choice activity she wants to use is full by the time she gets to the board. It often takes Jillian 20 to 30 minutes to calm down in the cool down space before she is ready to safely reengage with the other children and youth.

You and other staff members want to better support Jillian during this time and increase safety for the other children. Think about the following questions.

- **What might be potential causes for Jillian’s behavior during arrival time?**

Jillian may feel overwhelmed with the large number of children together in small spaces at once, such as by the cubbies putting away belongings or lined up by the sink.

Jillian may struggle to remember the arrival routine and complete the necessary steps in order.

Jillian may feel frustrated that she cannot pursue the activities she wants to.

- **Should you make changes to the arrival routine for all the children? If so, what might these look like?**

Think carefully through the necessary steps for arrival time—are there any extra? Perhaps, staff members can sign children in as they collect them from school, and we can eliminate child sign-in from the routine (consult with supervisor to see if this could work).

Once necessary steps are determined, you could try

- **Sending fewer children at a time. Perhaps you have a small fun activity ready for arrival to ease this transition, and then send children and youth in small groups to complete the arrival routine.**
• Instead of going to the choice board after washing their hands, perhaps children and youth come to a meeting space, where once again, you have a small activity to engage in, and then you send children and youth in small groups to select their choice activity.

• Making sure children will have the opportunity to try activity areas they are interested in. Have a system in place about what to do if an activity area on the choice board is full—is there a waiting list? How do children indicate they want to be on it? How frequently do you ask children to change? It may be more reassuring to Jillian if she knows she will have a chance with the activity she wants.

Talk with other staff members about how the arrival routine is working for the group as a whole; it may be best to try some additional supports for Jillian first before changing the group’s routine.

• Are there any environmental changes you could make to better support Jillian?

Perhaps moving Jillian’s cubby or locker space to an end, so she has more space for herself to settle and get ready.

If possible, providing more than one sink to wash hands and sign-in sheet (perhaps divided by alphabet).

Provide a way for children and youth to indicate they want to be next for a particular activity area or a waiting list system of some kind. Provide a way for children and youth to know when it will be their turn.

Evaluate if particular activity areas are really popular (often have waiting lists) and consider making them bigger, changing where they are located or adding additional staff members there so that more children can use that space at one time. If particular activity areas are popular due to a certain current interest, brainstorm with staff about ways to meet that interest in different activity areas as well (e.g., could constructing robots in the art space also happen with different materials in the toys and games area?).

• What schedule changes or strategies could you try for Jillian?

Some ideas to consider:

• Construct an individual routine card, perhaps with pictures and words to help Jillian remember the steps in the arrival routine.

• Use peer-modeling and pair Jillian up with another child or youth she is friends with and who understands the arrival routine and can help be a guide for Jillian.

• When Jillian arrives, have a special activity waiting for her and a friend, perhaps she likes math problems or enjoys fantasy fiction. Give them a few minutes to work on this idea as the other children filter through the routine, then, when there are not as many children, ask Jillian and her friend to complete arrival.

• Reassure Jillian that she will be able to try the activity area she wants. Perhaps two days a week, you save a space for her in that area she wants so she has an opportunity to be first.
- **How would you work with Jillian’s family to support her?**

*Kindly explain to Jillian’s family some of the behaviors you’ve seen and what you have tried so far. Ask them for ideas or things that have worked for them at home or in other settings. Share with her family some of the ideas you and other staff members have come up with, and share that you have also talked this through with your trainer, coach, or supervisor. Check back in with Jillian’s family as you try out some of the strategies above.*