TURNING PAGES,
BUILDING FUTURES

LEARNING WHERE LIFE HAPPENS

When Your Child Gets Stuck on One Way to Do Things

Building flexibility without taking away what feels safe.

Short on time? Jump to page 3 for the One Small Change planner.

Start Here

Some children do things the same way every time: the same route, the same cup, the same seat, the same order of the bedtime routine. Predictability helps your child know what is coming, and that is a strength - not stubbornness to fix. It only becomes a problem when a change is needed and there is no other way the day can go. The goal is not to remove routines. It is to add enough flexibility that one change doesn't end the day.

The big idea: Changes are easier to handle when they are small, expected, and practiced when nothing is wrong.

You are not teaching your child to like change. You are teaching that a change can be handled - and that the important things stay the same even when one detail doesn't.

Try This: Make room for a change

Name what stays the same

Try: When something has to change, point out what isn't changing: a different cup but the same juice, a different route but the same school. Anchoring a change to the things that hold steady makes it easier to take.

Practice small changes when nothing is wrong

Try: Swap something tiny in a low-stakes moment: the blue cup instead of the usual one, shoes on before teeth are brushed. Calm, small swaps teach the skill before the day you really need it.

Show the change before it happens

Try: For changes you can see coming, preparation beats surprise. Use a First-Then statement, a visual schedule, or a simple written reminder: "First the store, then the park." Show what will change and what will stay the same. Give your child time to process the information, and revisit it as needed.

Note: Choose the format your child understands best—pictures, written words, or a verbal reminder.

Offer a choice inside the change

Try: Change is easier to accept when your child still has a piece of control: "We're taking the new way home - do you want to look for the red mailbox or count the dogs?" The change isn't the choice; what happens inside it is.

Model flexibility out loud

Try: When plans change, calmly model how you adjust. "The blue cup is in the dishwasher. I'll use the green one today." Show that a change can be manageable without expecting your child to feel the same way.

Plan for what happens next

Try: Let your child know what comes after the change. “We’ll take the new route, then stop at the library like usual.” A familiar next step can make an unfamiliar experience easier to navigate.

Change one part, keep the rest

Try: When you can’t avoid a change in routine, change as little as possible. Same bedtime stories in a new order. Same food on a different plate. A routine can bend without breaking.

Pick one routine and one small swap to practice this week.

What to look for

You don’t need formal data to notice whether the practice is working. Over several days, watch for:

- ☐ Tolerating a small swap without stopping the activity
- ☐ Looking to you during a change instead of melting down
- ☐ Recovering quickly once the change is over
- ☐ Accepting a warning about an upcoming change
- ☐ Joining back in after the routine shifts

One small change is information - and a place to build from.

If it doesn’t work...

If the change still falls apart, that isn’t a verdict on your child. It is information. Try:

- Make the change smaller. A swap as small as changing a spoon teaches more than a whole new routine.
- Change your timing. Practice when the day is calm, not when everyone is already rushed or stressed.
- Prepare for the surprise. Some children need to hear about an upcoming change several times before it happens.
- Keep more of the routine the same. Change one thing, not five.
- Check what the change costs. If the new way is louder, brighter, or more work, the problem may be the change itself, not the flexibility.
- Notice what the reaction is saying. Distress may signal uncertainty, discomfort, or overload—not defiance. Offer support first; practice later.

Remember: *You are not teaching your child to want change. You are teaching that change can be handled - and that the people and things they count on stay the same.*

Want more practical ideas?

Get practical, doable strategies for teaching your own child at home - what to try next, how to break it down, and how to make it fit your family's routines. Explore PAGE Resources → Or, if you'd like occasional practical ideas delivered by email, **join the PAGE list at pageaba.com.**

Need help figuring out what to try?

Every child is different. If you're trying strategies at home and aren't sure what to change, PAGE can help you identify practical, individualized ways to support learning, communication, participation, and independence in everyday life. **Learn more or schedule a consultation at pageaba.com.**

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One Small Change

A plan for practicing flexibility when nothing is wrong, so a bigger change is easier later.

The routine or object we'll practice with:

A small change I can try:

What I'll say before we start:

What happened:

Keep the swap small and introduce it when your child is settled. Point out what stays the same. If the change is difficult, adjust the approach and try again when your child is ready.

Pick one small swap. Try it when the day is calm.