

Family Routines

Life with children can seem chaotic, at times even out of control. Establishing some basic routines can restore a sense of order that will make life easier for both parents and children. A routine doesn't mean a rigid schedule; young children need structure with flexibility (especially on weekends). For most families, things work better when everyday activities follow a predictable pattern.

Benefits for children

- **Sense of security** - When things happen in the same order every day, children learn to predict what comes next. They feel safe and secure because someone else is taking care of things for them; they don't have to worry.
- **Trust** - Children learn to trust when the people who care for them follow a dependable routine. This is the foundation on which they build their trust in the larger world.
- **Self-confidence** - Children's confidence in themselves also increases when they are able to predict what will come next.
- **Good habits** - Routines, such as regular exercise, build good health habits that teach children to look after themselves.

Benefits for parents

- **Planning** - Having a routine helps parents plan to accomplish necessary chores. Especially with a small baby, finding time to take a shower and buy groceries can be a challenge!
- **Discipline** - Children are less likely to test the rules by misbehaving when regular tasks become part of an established routine. If tidying up toys always comes before washing hands and sitting down to eat, most children will stop protesting and get to work fairly quickly. If bath is always followed by bed, a story, a song, a goodnight kiss and a wave from the bedroom door, sleep will come more easily.

What makes a good routine?

We are all individuals; there is no recipe for a routine that works for every family. Here are some factors to consider, along with examples of questions to ask yourself when planning a routine. Remember to take into account the needs and preferences of both parents and children.

- **Physical needs** - Is everyone fed and well rested before taking part in other activities? Is there time for physical activity (a walk to the park, energetic dancing in the living room) every day? Does the routine let everyone get enough sleep?
- **Social needs** - Are toddlers getting together with

other children their age? Are parents seeing friends? (Playgroups can answer both these needs.)

- **Intellectual needs** - Do children get time to play in ways that stimulate their understanding of their surroundings? Are parents getting enough adult conversation?
- **Emotional needs** - Are babies getting the comforting they need? Do children feel secure in their parents' attention? Are parents getting support?
- **Stage of development** - Does the routine take into account how needs change as children grow? More snacks during a growth spurt? More choices offered to toddlers? (For instance, "Will you brush your teeth before the bath or after?") More responsibilities transferred to older children. (For instance, helping to prepare snack or making a school lunch.)
- **Individual differences** - Does the routine allow for a child's particular temperament? For instance, limiting the number of errands because this child has trouble making transitions from store to car to store to car... Or lots of flexibility because this child has irregular body rhythms and isn't hungry at the same time every day. Or always the same routine because this child doesn't like surprises.

Changing the routine

Sometimes, changing the routine can solve behaviour problems.

- **Change the sequence** - Even if people tell you a bath before bed calms children, your child may get excited and have trouble going to sleep. The problem might disappear if you move bath time before supper.
- **Recognize a need** - If your child always has a tantrum before supper, maybe she's hungry. Try adding an afternoon snack to the routine. Or maybe she needs to be sure of your attention. Try a short playtime with you before you start cooking or let her shred the lettuce beside you.
- **Smooth transitions** - Children often misbehave when it is time to change activities. To avoid trouble, try adding a song to the routine to signal upcoming changes. For example, if a toddler has to stop playing to go meet an older brother's school bus, sing "Johnny's bus is coming soon, we will go to meet him," sung to the tune of "Frère Jacques." The song gives children time to adjust and make the transition.

Routines are never set in stone; they will always need to be adapted as conditions change. By observing your children, by knowing your own needs, you will be able to make a predictable routine that suits your family.

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