

Routines: Why They Matter and How to Get Started

One of the most important things that you can do to make your young child feel safe is to establish as much routine in his life as possible. Children (and adults) feel the most secure when their lives are predictable. When adults provide environments that feel safe, children learn that they can trust others to take care of them and meet their needs, so they become free to relax and explore their world.

Young children do not yet fully understand the concept of time, so they do not order their lives by hours and minutes, but rather by the events that happen. When events happen in the same order every day, children have a better understanding of their world, and therefore feel more secure. A regular schedule gives children a way to order and organize their lives. When young children know what to expect, they become more confident in both themselves and the world around them. They know they will not be confronted with unfamiliar tasks that they are for which they are unprepared.

A young child's brain is still undergoing major development, especially the part of the brain that is able to plan ahead and make predictions about the future. A routine helps kids practice making these simple predictions, as well as understand concepts such as "before and after." Routines also help children develop self-control because they know they have to wait until a certain time to do a particular activity. A regular schedule fosters responsibility and independence because children will be able to perform more activities on their own if they have done the same activities many times before in the same environment.

A routine is especially important during particularly difficult times of day, such as bedtime or getting dressed in the morning. When there is a routine in place, there can be little argument because the expectations for behavior are taken for granted. Therefore, a major benefit of establishing routines is that you will cut down on stress for yourself. Keeping to a routine may sound like an impossible task when you are overwhelmed with balancing a constantly changing schedule for multiple members of your household. However, even implementing the smallest routine can make a big difference. Here are 5 ideas for starting a routine in your home:

1. Plan at least one meal per day that you have together as a family. This meal does not have to be dinner; even a 15-minute breakfast where everyone gets to share their plans for the day can be effective. Turn off the television and do not answer the phone during your family time. This is a great way to start a routine that allows children to take responsibility, even for something small, such as carrying the silverware to the table.
2. Have a bedtime ritual, which will help children slowly calm down, and allow them to associate certain activities with getting sleepy. Think about what calms your child. Is it taking a bath? Reading a story? Listening to soft music? Always do the bedtime preparation in the same order, and ask your child questions such as, "What do we do after we put on our pajamas?" A great item to include in the bedtime ritual is that of talking about your day. Let your child tell you what he did that day, and prompt him if he forgets. This part of the routine not only helps children with memory, time orientation, and language skills, but it also shows them that you care about what they did that day.
3. Include preparation for transitions in the routine. For example, say, "We have 10 minutes left before we start getting ready for bed. When the big hand gets to the 12, it will be time to put on your pajamas."
4. Work together to make pictures that indicate each step of the routine, put the pictures in order on a colorful sheet of paper, and hang the finished product in your child's room. You will not only be helping build creativity in your child, but you will also promote self-sufficiency, as your child will be able to look at the pictures to identify what step comes next.
5. Although routine is very important for young children, do not be too rigid. Children do need to learn how to be flexible and deal with minor changes. If there is an interruption to the routine, tell your child, "I know we usually do x, but today we are going to do y because (reason). Tomorrow we will go back to our usual schedule." If most of their day is predictable, young children will be able to deal with small changes, especially if they are prepared for the changes and see you modeling calm behavior as you deal with problems that occur.

It is never too late to start a routine. You set a good example for your child when you tell her, "The way that we have been doing things has not been working. We are going to try something new. Here is our new schedule." While you should definitely be open to the fact that the schedule may need some adjustment, you also need to be firm in sticking to the new routine. At first, your child will try to get you to break the routine, but do not give in to old habits. Young children need both consistency and limits. Know ahead of time that your child will have difficulty adjusting, and be prepared with how you will handle this resistance.

The earlier that you begin to order your child's life, the easier it will be. When you stick to a routine, you teach your child how to arrange her time in a manner that is efficient, productive, and cuts down on stress. This sense of order is not only important for making your young child feel secure at this moment, but it will also allow your child to internalize an automatic sense of how to organize her own life as she grows up.

