

## Routines

Every family needs routines. They are how families organise themselves to get things done, spend time together and have fun. Every family has its own unique routines that help family members to know who should do what, when and in what order.

For young children routines provide a sense of stability and security by allowing them to know what is going to happen next. This is comforting for them and can go a long way to alleviating every day anxiety, as children gain a sense of mastery over their own lives. In turn, this also helps develop better behaviour and some sense of personal control, and this is not always easy for young children. For example, a night-time routine of getting into pyjamas, cleaning teeth, having a story and getting into bed at a regular time helps children to plan what to do next and what the expected result will be. It also provides them with the opportunity to take responsibility and do the next step without being told; often to please you. This is rewarding for both of you.

Children face so much change in their lives as they grow. Everything from progressing to eating new foods, meeting new people, going to day care then onto kindergarten, new teachers and classmates every year to new friends that come and go. They will handle this change best when it comes in the context of stable, predictable family routine. It may sound boring to adults but children thrive on sameness and repetition.

The benefits of routine can be summarised as follows:

- Routine eliminates power struggles. There's less need to be bossy because "this is just what we do at this time of the day."
- Routine helps children to cooperate. They know what's coming next and stress and anxiety are reduced for everyone.
- Routine helps children take charge of their own activities. Over time, for example, they learn to unpack their school bag at the end of the day, put their lunch in their bag in the morning and brush their teeth without reminders. As a result, children begin to feel more independent and have less need to rebel or be oppositional.
- Establishing routines is a good way to teach children healthy habits like brushing their teeth, getting some exercise or washing their hands after using the toilet.
- Through routine, children learn the concept of "looking forward" to things they enjoy, and in the process grow patience.
- Routine helps to set body clocks so that children fall asleep more easily at night.
- Good routines means you and your child are less likely to forget important things like taking regular medication.
- Routine is the perfect time to introduce little rituals that build cooperation and precious connections with your child; maybe a regular high five on "hello" when you meet up at the end of the school day, or a story and 2 kisses as you say good night.

- Routines help parents maintain consistency in expectations. If everything is always a battle, parents can end up allowing more TV, for example and letting important things, like cleaning teeth, slide. When things are routine, parents are more likely to stick to healthy expectations for everyone in the family because “that’s just what we do in this household”.

Interruption to routine is inevitable from time to time. When this occurs give children as much notice and as clear an explanation as possible. Sudden changes to routine, being caught off-guard, or regular uncertainty can be anxiety-inducing scenarios for most children. By knowing what lies ahead, children can give their full attention (and enjoyment) to current activities rather than worrying about what is around the next corner.

Routine is not just important for young children. Older children who have well-established routines are more able to make the adjustments required to commit to after school sport, training sessions, increased homework requirements and working commitments. It is easier to adjust to a new routine if you already have one. Adolescent children may challenge routines (like bed times) and this provides a good opportunity and starting point for parents to negotiate new rules and boundaries with them.

If your older children are struggling with homework, sporting commitments or even seem to lack motivation, helping them to establish a routine could be helpful. Help and support them in doing this, whilst allowing them to make the decisions that drive it.

We all benefit from having routine. When we’re stressed or under pressure and not functioning at our best, our routine becomes our default mode. It’s not unusual to hear someone say, “I’m just going through the motions to get through each day” or “I was on automatic pilot.”

When the “default mode” is regular sleep, regular meal times, regular exercise, a regular visit to a friend, parent or grandparent, then the ability to cope is greatly enhanced. Routines evolve, of course, day care becomes school, and primary school becomes high school. Sometimes going home at the end of the day alternates between going to Mum’s and going to Dad’s. Homework and out of school commitments change, but the principle of establishing a routine does not.

Strong, regular routine can form good habits for life. Routine does not have to be oppressive and there will always be times when routine is broken, for example staying up late for a special occasion, or to watch an eclipse, or getting up very early to catch a plane. But mostly, routine is your friend. It makes life easier. Not only will your children feel safer and more secure, they will internalize the ability to structure their own lives.

References and further reading

<http://www.ahaparenting.com/parenting-tools/family-life>

<http://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/family-dynamics/pages/The-Importance-of-Family-Routines.aspx>

[http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/family\\_routines\\_how\\_and\\_why\\_they\\_work](http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/family_routines_how_and_why_they_work).

Gai Bath and Andrea Maver

[gbath@smc.tas.edu.au](mailto:gbath@smc.tas.edu.au)

[amaver@smc.tas.edu.au](mailto:amaver@smc.tas.edu.au)

School Counsellors

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