



Finding Comfort in Routines

“Routine is to a child what walls are to a house; it gives boundaries and dimensions to his life.” ~ Rudolf Dreikurs

When asked, “What’s the most helpful thing parents can do to ease the transition to school?” the answer from PEP Parent Educator Elizabeth Gelfeld was simple: “Establish a routine.” The parts of daily life that are done repeatedly in a particular order, such as putting on socks before shoes, become predictable. A child who carries out these routines day after day learns to regard them as rules.

Life is not always predictable, and sometimes exceptions are necessary. However, it doesn’t take most parents long to notice the chaos that ensues when routines aren’t consistent. For some children, a disrupted routine can easily throw off the entire rhythm of the day.

Children find comfort in routines. Preschools, daycare facilities, and school classrooms follow daily schedules, usually displayed prominently on large, colorful charts. Child-friendly routines that change seldom (and only with good reason) create an atmosphere of safety and security. This also applies at home. Children learn the patterns of life as they experience generally predictable mornings, mealtimes, playtimes, homework sessions, and bedtimes.



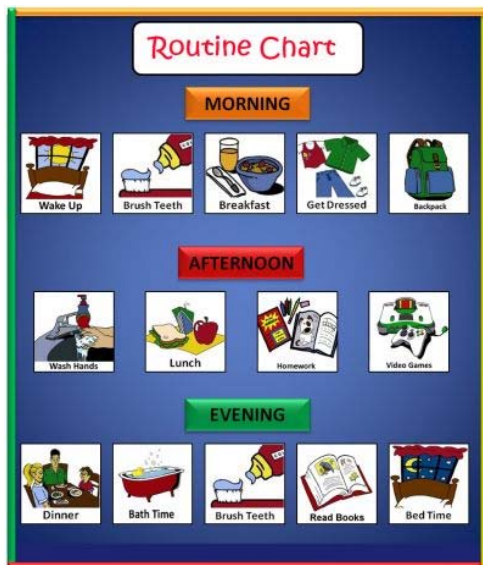
When used consistently, routines become habits, early lessons in time management and the skills of being organized and focused. Most important, routines give children a sense of control, particularly when parents involve kids in establishing them.

With babies and toddlers, parents get to set most of the routines, though they’ll have better luck if they respect their child’s developmental needs and temperament. From about age 2 on, children need to be increasingly involved as they learn what’s happening, what will happen next, what to expect, and eventually what’s expected of them in terms of their contribution.

There are two things guaranteed to slow kids down to a crawl and invite power struggles: constant admonitions to “hurry up, get a move on!” and expecting a child to conform to a schedule in which the child has no say. Instead of fighting your children, win their cooperation by seeking their input.

- “What would your ideal morning be like?”
- “What things do you need to do in the morning to be prepared to leave on time?”
- “How much time do you think you’ll need to eat breakfast? Get dressed? Brush your teeth?”
- “If we have a few minutes before we leave, what special thing could we do together - cuddle, read a story, walk to school?”
- “What can I count on you to do in the morning - set out the cereal bowls, feed the cat?” Making a meaningful contribution helps a child feel capable, connected, and essential to the family.

After generating the “to do” list, create a routine chart. Younger children will enjoy pasting cut-out pictures - as in this sample [chart](#) - or photos you take of them to illustrate the flow of the morning. Older children can design and make the chart, with your participation and encouragement. For example, a child might decide to list clock times, working backward from the departure time, as did the 7-year-old son of a PEP I parent:



7:30 - Wake up

7:45 - Breakfast and pack lunch

8:15 - Get dressed and brush teeth

8:30 - Pack up, shoes on

8:45 - Walk to school

Once completed, the routine chart becomes the guide. Instead of reminding and nagging, parents simply ask, “What’s next on your list?” Wait for the reply and then “act as if” the child will follow through. Have faith and assume the best. Model routines by getting yourself ready and going about the business of your own morning.

Additional tips:

- Identify the “needs of the situation” - getting to school on time peacefully - and stay focused on that, especially during challenging mornings. Let it become your mantra.

- Allow each child to choose an alarm clock and wake up with it.
- Organize things the night before: select clothes; pack lunches and backpacks; sign required forms and put them in the backpacks.
- Leave the electronics turned off in the morning. TV and other screens are distracting and hard for children to leave behind.
- To help kids stay on task, do things together such as getting dressed and brushing teeth; or use timers.
- Make it fun. Challenge your child to beat you in a getting-dressed race. Just make sure to keep it friendly, and never pit one child against another. You can also challenge a child to beat her own personal best time.
- Build in extra time to reduce stress when the routine is new. Leave room for flexibility, particularly with preschool-age children.
- Give the routine time to work. Don't expect your mornings to fall into place flawlessly. Revisit and tweak the routine after a couple of weeks have passed.
- When you feel tempted to nag, say something friendly like, "I'm going to go sweep the front porch. I'll be waiting for you outside when you're ready" - and walk away.
- Finally, when things go well, be sure to notice and comment!

[Return to PEP Homepage](#)