



# The Importance of Routines and How to Maintain Them

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There's a woman in my neighborhood who runs a home daycare. I often see her attending to five or so children, sometimes on a trip to the wading pool, or on a nature walk. Never a tantrum, never a tear, everything about her brood is always calm and joyful. One day I had to ask her how she does it. She told me, "I have three words for you. Routines, routines, routines."

It turns out that she isn't the only one who thinks so. Psychologists and educators have found that children who have some routine and structure in their lives do better than those who don't. How much routine is best, is a question for another time. The focus of this article is more so why and how to establish routines.

## Routines Reduce Anxiety

Children rely on order and predictability to feel safe. An easy place to see this at work is the first week of school. Most children realize after the third or fourth day that Mom or Dad will come get them after a number of hours. Safe in this knowledge, they can happily play in the sandbox or build a structure out of wooden blocks.

Consistent routines will help your child feel as if they know what is going to happen next, they feel in control of their environment and therefore feel more secure and less anxious.

## Routines Build Confidence

Children need repetition to develop skills. Consider bedtime routines as an example. If your child has been following a bedtime routine for some time, he understands what to do and how to do it from the mere act of doing it over and over again. When you say "It's bedtime", your child might come to understand that this means tidy-up, brush teeth, put pajamas on. These are all things that small children require repetition to master.

The same principle applies to all the things your child will learn at various stages of development, whether it's setting the table or peeling potatoes.

Knowing what to do takes part of the stress out of any activity. This helps them carry over a can-do attitude towards other things. Having routines in various aspects of their day builds good habits that will serve them for life.



## Routines Help Children Behave Well

Children require clear boundaries to help them behave well, establishing routines is a great way to help with boundary setting. If children get the impression that anything goes, then they will behave accordingly. Of course, you don't want to impose too much control over every minute of your child's day. But no control, or too little of it, can be disastrous.

For example, If a child is used to going to bed whenever he wants, that's not a good thing. It can result in problems ranging from tiredness and inattentiveness in school, poor impulse control (tantrums, over-reacting to small problems, lack of control over emotions, acting first and thinking later), or worse, to major mental health issues.

Here is how establishing routines can help you with boundary setting. Your child learns over time that after tidying up, brushing his teeth, putting his pajamas on, then comes a read-aloud and a soothing settling into bed. This is a much different scenario than a power struggle on the occasion when you really need him to get to bed at a certain time. Building this respect for boundaries can be applied to other things like, "eat your veggies, then you can have a dessert", or "homework first, then playtime".

# How to Establish and Maintain Routines

## Make It Easy and Fun (When You Can)

Smaller children rely on simplicity. Offer one instruction at a time to smaller children or to children with learning disabilities. You might need to chunk goals into smaller bits and gradually add another one when you've established one part. For example, after your child has learned to independently put away toys, then add a new expectation to the bedtime routine. Make a game of it, sing a song, play some music.



## Tag New Routines to Existing Ones

Raising a child is a life-long game of gradual release of responsibility. Let's say your little one started kindergarten today. She already knew to hang her coat here, or put her shoes there when she gets home. Now that she's starting school, add her lunch bag to the routine of putting things away.

## Consistence Is Key

By definition, routines are supposed to be regular and predictable, at a fixed interval, whether it's mornings, after school, dinner time or weekends.

Inconsistency can be confusing to a child. It's reasonable for them to wonder why you insist that they put away their toys some nights before bed, or why one parent insists on it, but the other doesn't. If tidying up before bed is important to you, then be consistent about it.

## Be Flexible

Of course, things come up. Routines get interrupted. When that happens, give your child a warning ahead of time, explain that something will be different and let them know what will happen, or tell them that you'll get back to the routines when this is over. Say something like, "We'll get home past your bedtime tonight, you might fall asleep in the car" or "I know you're tired from your field trip today, so you can skip tidying up this time."



Remember the woman in my neighborhood who makes caring for five or six small children look like a walk in the park? Based on my own experience as a parent and a teacher, her secret of "routines, routines, routines" makes perfect sense to me. They can be difficult to establish, but once that's done, whether it's getting them out the door in the mornings, or getting them to bed, routines will help your child develop good lifelong habits, and they make your life a lot easier.

The article has been prepared by Jacqueline Smith, Kids Academy's author.

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