

Daily Routines: The Importance of Everyday Rituals to Children

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A daily routine is anything which helps us to celebrate the rhythms of life with our children. Routines, when based on love and conscious respect for our children, provide a rhythm to life which is consistent enough to provide safety and security in a world full of new experiences.

Advantages to Routines:

Routines are portable. Unlike a security blanket, they can't get left behind or get too tattered to use. They can be taught to baby-sitters to give a child a sense of safety and sameness even when mom and dad aren't around. They can be used to provide a familiar focus to an unfamiliar situation. (If you're on a plane, you can use the bedtime routine to help your child fall asleep.)

Routines help kids learn. We form connections in our brain (i.e. we learn) when we repeat something again and again. The more you create routines for your child, the quicker they learn about life.

Routines provide consistency. Children need patterns and consistency in order to feel secure. There are so many changes in a child's world that he receives great comfort from the reassuring repetition of family rituals. Routines help a child make sense of the world.

Routines help to smooth out the day for parents too. Once you develop habits, there's a lot less last-minute panics and frantic planning. Also, easing transitions with a routine means fewer tantrums.

Routine help families to examine what works for them and what is important to them. Some families value the routine of three home-cooked, sit-down meals a day. Others find themselves eating fast food all the time, but find their ritual time at bedtime when the whole family gets some quiet interaction time. The important part is for each family to find its own way.

Pitfalls to Avoid

The ideal routine provides some stability and sameness to everyday life, yet is always flexible and able to adapt to new situations, and always meaningful for those whom it serves.

Rigidity: Making comfortable routines into absolute and unbreakable rules takes away all their benefits, leaving a controlling, oppressive feeling. Balance consistency with flexibility.

Out of Control Routines. A bedtime routine should take 10 or 20 minutes. If yours takes over an hour and you hate and resent that, do something different!!

Minimized Rituals: As anthropologist Brett Williams states: "Imagine a family where nothing was special - not meals, not bath time, not holidays, not birthdays. Eventually, the children get the message that they're not important, that life doesn't mean much."

Some Ideas for Routines for Everyday Use

Morning. Many children need to greet the morning slowly and gently. They need to be eased into the day ahead. How do you greet the day together? If morning is a mad rush in your house, how can you make space for a more pleasant beginning? Try:

- ◇ Sing a traditional song to greet each day.
- ◇ Begin every morning cuddling your child as you look out the window, talk about the weather and the things that you see together, and about what to expect from the day ahead.
- ◇ A quiet breakfast together, reading or just being quiet.
- ◇ If you've got an early riser, rituals can set understandable limits: they can learn that they can get up when it's light outside, they can learn that they should be quiet till the alarm goes off...

Off-to-work or dropping off at school. When a parent and child separate in the morning, a good-bye ritual can help the child feel important and valued, and help him understand that when parents leave, they always return later.

The routine may include a family hug, a special good-bye phrase, or waving bye-bye from the window. Welcome home routines are also important, as a celebration of the family reunited.

Transition Times. Young children have a hard time with transitions. Leaving a park, having clothes changed, being left with a baby-sitter, or stopping a game to eat lunch can all cause tears and tantrums. Routines ease these transitions by helping the child understand what to expect.

Clean-Up Times. Having a special clean-up song or game can encourage kids to tidy up. Making a ritual of it also helps to point out that whenever toys go away they will come back later.

Mealtimes. In many cultures, the most valued traditions involve groups gathering together to eat. Mealtimes can be a deliberate ritual of human interaction, offering good food to nourish physical well-being, and good fellowship to nourish physical well-being. Making mealtime special can also help to develop good eating habits, positive attitudes about food. Try:

- ◇ Setting the table - a little effort at formality helps set aside the mealtime as something special.
- ◇ Saying grace, or singing a song before every dinner.
- ◇ Checking-in. Everyone shares news of their days - gets others' undivided attention.
- ◇ No TV! Make this an interactive family time.

Bedtime. Bedtime rituals are very important for a child. They are a chance to wrap up the day, and get centered again and re-connect to the family with some quiet time together. Some children especially need these rituals, which can provide reassurance for a child who is frightened of the night, calming and quieting down time for a child who has a hard time settling down on her own, and consistency and predictability for a child whose daily life is chaotic or unpredictable.

It's helpful to do a short version of this ritual, or some other special routine, at nap time. Try:

- ◇ Before bedtime may be bath-time, the warm water helps to soothe some children. Bedtime snacks are also a good idea. Brush teeth so bacteria doesn't build up overnight.
- ◇ Give a five-minute warning, so the child knows bedtime is coming - eases the transition.
- ◇ Changing into pajamas - helps to signal the end of the day.
- ◇ Re-cap the day's activities, and talk about what to expect out of the next day.
- ◇ Play a quiet game that takes concentration and togetherness.
- ◇ Story-time and cuddle-time. (With some kids you have limit how many books you'll read...)
- ◇ Give child a chance to pick out a special toy (stuffed animal or book) to take to bed.
- ◇ Bedtime prayers are important to many families.
- ◇ Lullabies work great - some families sing the same every night, some like variety.

Help Your Child Recognize the Routine

Sometimes we've been doing a routine but our kids haven't figured it out yet. It helps if you say things like "We'll read two books tonight, just like we always do" or "I love it when you blow kisses at me when I leave" or "remember, every time we leave the house, I need you to get your shoes from the front closet." This helps to reinforce that the routine is "how we do things in our family."

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