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PARENTING RESOURCE

Creating Routines for Love and Learning

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Routines provide the two key ingredients necessary for learning: relationships and repetition.



For most of us, our lives involve a series of patterns—routines we perform almost every day, like stopping at the same place each day for coffee on the way to work. This is also very true for babies and toddlers. While we play a part in creating routines in our children's lives, we may not fully realize the role they play in young children's development.

Routines and Self-Control

Routines help babies and toddlers learn self-control.

Consistent routines, activities that happen at about the same time and in about the same way each day, provide comfort and a sense of safety to young children. Whether it is time to play, time for a snack, a nap, or a loved one to return, knowing what will happen next gives babies and toddlers security and emotional stability. It helps them learn to trust that caring adults will provide what they need. When children feel this sense of trust and safety, they are free to do their "work," which is to play, explore, and learn.

Routines and Power Struggles

Routines can bring you and your child closer together and reduce power struggles.

Stable routines allow babies and toddlers to anticipate what will happen next. This gives young children confidence, and also a sense of control, such as when parents say: "It is bedtime. Would you like to brush teeth now or after we get your pajamas on?" Routines can also limit the amount of "no's" and behavior corrections you need to give a toddler throughout the day, since your child can better predict what should happen next: "I know you want a cracker. But it is clean-up time now. Remember, after clean-up, it is snack-time."

Routines and Safety



Routines guide positive behavior and safety.

Routines are like instructions—they guide children’s actions toward a specific goal. Routines can be used for many reasons, but two of the most important are ensuring children’s health and safety, and helping children learn positive, responsible behavior. For example, children wash hands before they have snack, or must hold an adult’s hand when crossing the street. Here is another example: *Two-year-old George loves to play with his trucks in the afternoon as mom feeds baby Kira. When mom is done, it is time for them to pick up Dad at the bus stop. All the trucks have to be back in the bucket before they go. Mom lets George know when it’s clean-up time by ringing a special bell she has and saying, “Okay, driver, it’s time for the trucks to park in the garage.” One by one, George wheels each truck up a block plank and into the bucket. Each day they do this, and each day George knows he’ll find his trucks where he put them—back in the bucket. He also knows that after he puts away his trucks, he’ll get to see his dad which always makes him happy.*

Routines and Social Skills**Routines support and develop children’s social skills.**

As babies grow, they come into contact with more people and begin to learn patterns and routines for social interaction. Greetings, good-byes, and chatting with others are examples of routine interactions that teach social skills. These interactions are also opportunities to help our children develop language skills.

Play-time and mealtime are two routines that are very social times for children and parents alike. Through talking, taking turns, sharing toys, learning to wait, and helping others during these activities, young children learn important social skills that will help them later on in school.

Routines and Transitions**Routines help children cope with transitions.**

Depending on your child’s temperament, transitions between activities may be easy or more difficult. Going from play to lunch, lunch to the store, the store to home...and especially transitioning to bed time, can be challenging. Routines (like bedtime routines) can help make transitions easier. Some parents use a timer or a “5-minute warning” to prepare their toddlers for a change in activity. Others use a book, song, or special game. Special rituals can also help transition a child from one caregiver to the next, such as this routine:

Each day, Leke and his mother count the steps as they walk up to the child care center. They leave his coat and lunch in his cubby. Then they go to the toy area where the other children are playing. Leke picks out a toy. He and his mother exchange “butterfly kisses” and mom waves good-bye.

Routines and Parental Happiness**Routines are satisfying for parents, too.**

Not only do routines and rituals make transitions easier for children—they also help ease adults into parenthood. The early stages of becoming a parent can be overwhelming and sometimes put a strain on marriage. Continuing a ritual from your early marriage years (like an evening out or a special vacation spot) can help. In addition, taking a special ritual from your own childhood (such as a book that was read to you, a special breakfast made for you on Saturdays) can bridge your transition from a couple to a family.

Routines and Learning

Routines are an important opportunity for learning.

Daily routines are often thought of as just "maintenance" activities: meal time, running errands, getting ready for bed, taking baths. But these everyday actions are rich opportunities to support your child's learning and development, while having fun. Routines offer the chance to build self-confidence, curiosity, social skills, self-control, communication skills, and more. Take grocery shopping:

Midori (aged 2) and her mom wheeled through the supermarket. Midori pointed at the apples and her mom said, "Look at the red apples and the green apples. Don't they look yummy?" She held one out for Midori to touch: "Feel how smooth they are." Then she picked up a plastic bag and turned back to Midori: "Why don't you help me choose some to bring home?" Together, they counted out five apples and put them in the bag. Midori tried her best to help, but those apples were hard to hold! It took two hands to get one in the bag. "Nice work!" said her mother, "Thanks for helping."

Here, a simple interaction in the produce section opened the doors for practicing language skills, taking turns, talking, using one's senses, and learning about numbers. It also provided a chance to nurture Midori's self-confidence and self-esteem as her mother let her know that her thoughts and interests were important. Midori's mom also let her know that she was capable of doing important things, like choosing and bagging the apples.

Routines provide the two key ingredients for learning: relationships and repetition. So enjoy these "ordinary" moments with your child. If she's having fun with you, she's learning, too!