Building a Routine and Sticking with It for Yourself and Your Child
by Kristin Schulz (CCC Teacher)

Getting up and out of the house on time has always been difficult for Graeme, my two-year-old son, and I. We had our fair share of meltdowns and tantrums, stressed feelings, shouting and tears. I thought I had a routine, but I would let silly distractions and seemingly simple requests such as, “Can I watch Thomas?” throw the whole thing off. I would wonder, “How did things get so out of control?” and “Why does it have to be a fight every morning?” One morning my husband came in the room just as I was about to lose it and said, “You are giving him too many choices.” I stopped and thought. I was giving him a choice for every step in the routine. No wonder it was chaotic. A two-year-old does not have a sense of time, let alone what needs to happen. So I thought about what was realistic for my morning, what were important tasks, and what could be left until I got home that evening. I built a routine. I have learned over time that when I stick to the morning routine things go much smoother and we both are less stressed. The following article will guide you through the routine process, explaining what a routine is, when a routine might be useful in your life, and finally how to build one yourself. My hope is that you will find comfort in knowing that many parents and families go through struggles and there is a way to help your children gain independence and structure without losing your mind.

The “Super Nanny” Jo Frost says, “A routine provides a clear structure for daily life.” (p.44) When you think about all of the things you have to get done during the day, it can be very overwhelming. As a parent you have to get all of that stuff done, but with your children following close behind. This is when having a plan of action can help. If you know that the kids have to be dressed and ready to go by 8 am, your plan starts when they wake up. How can you structure the time so that it is logical and orderly for everyone involved? Maybe it would look like this: Wake the kids at 7 am and bring them to the table where they will eat. After breakfast it’s time to clean up. Bring the kids to the bathroom to wash their hands and face, brush teeth, and get dressed. Once they are clean and dressed, it’s time for shoes and out the door. If this is what you do every morning then your kids understand what is going to be happening and they can feel safe. According to the article Routines to the Rescue, Parents Magazine, 1999, “Routines give kids a sense of control. When kids can anticipate what’s going to happen, it makes them feel safe and builds a sense of trust in their parents and their environment.”

You might think this is going to be too hard. Let’s look at what the experts say. According to a workshop from 4-C entitled Everyday Magic,

“Children thrive on routines, they like their lives to be clear and predictable, and enjoy the security of comfortable repetition. Routines establish trust in children and show them that their world is a safe place... Young children are not able to plan in advance. Often, as adults, we get frustrated at our children for acting up during these times. However, try to think what it would be like if you did not know or understand why things around you were happening. Picture how you would feel if someone just loaded you into a car and didn’t explain where you were going or why. You would be anxious too!”

We should stop once in awhile and put ourselves in their shoes to see if what we are asking them makes sense within the time and limits of their abilities. We have high expectations for our children, and we need to make sure that the expectation makes sense so as to provide learning. “The easiest way for
children to learn is through repetition. Consistent routines teach children how to do necessary things like eating, bathing, tooth brushing, etc.” (Everyday Magic) Jo Frost has provided her readers with this advice, “Routines build consistency into family life. You also need an agreed upon set of rules. Before you can insist on certain standards of behavior from your child, you have to decide what is acceptable and what is not. Then you have to stick to your guns. If you’re always bending the rules and moving the goalposts, your child won’t have the first clue of what he should be doing and won’t take you seriously.” (p.47)

This brings us to actually building a routine. Have a plan for what you want accomplished and talk it over with your children if they are old enough. Giving them some control over how they will be moving through their day will provide them with an opportunity to be an active participant in the routine itself. “Routines should be respectful. Tell the child what you are going to do before you do it. Treat them as respectfully as you would an adult.” Elaine Goodwin also says, “Give children a warning. About ten minutes before you need them to do the routine, let them know. This prepares the children for what is coming to give them time to wrap-up what they are doing.” Then you have to guide them through it especially at first so they understand the expectations. Jo Frost says, “You’re talking through their day. But what you are not doing is offering them lots of choices.” Examples, “Let’s put on your shoes,” not, “Will you put on your shoes?” “When you have put on your shoes we can go to the park,” not, “If you put on your shoes, you can go to the park.” “The difference in the way you say things may be very subtle, but the difference in the results are not.” (p.50) Stick with the routine and have fun at the same time says Elaine Goodwin. “Make your routines fun! Your child has to eat and sleep anyway, why not use this time to teach your child and bond with them. You will find that doing so not only improves the child’s behavior during these necessary routines, but also helps them to feel better prepared for life.”

Some children are going to be able to pick up on the routines right away and others will need time and consistency. If you are finding that the routine is harder than it was before, maybe your child could use a visual reminder of the routine. Children think in pictures instead of words, and if you are getting frustrated saying the same thing over and over let the routine chart be your guide. “Visual cues are great because kids learn to tune out verbal instruction,” says Dr. Abrams. “With a chart, there’s less emotion, because it’s harder to argue with an inanimate object.” (Parents 2008) A chart should be simple and organized so the children can follow it. Have the kids help to create it to include them in the process. You can use simple drawing, pictures from magazines, or take digital pictures of the kids doing the routine themselves. Then when they ask, “What’s next?” you can say, “Look at the chart.” Just remember, you can build a routine for any time of the day: mealtime, bedtime, hand washing, teeth brushing, bath time, clean up, dressing and undressing, etc. Just work on one at a time and watch your life go from absolutely crazy to only slightly crazy.

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