

Establishing a Routine

Routines are tricky things to develop. In theory they should be easy to implement; however, they rarely are. Problematic to the situation is that children respond differently to routines, resulting in adults scratching their heads as to why a routine might work well for one child and not another. For some children, routines are a guide by which they find stability. The familiarity of the routine brings them comfort and security. Polar opposite to the child that loves routines is the one who does nothing but resist the concept of having a timetable to live by. Prolonged play and flexibility are this type of child's preferred life approach. Naturally, the child who laps up routines will make an adult's life easier; however, there are other factors aside from a child's natural proclivity to follow a routine that will influence the success adults experience when implementing routines into children's lives.

Other influencing factors

Consistency is a word that is regularly thrown around child psychology circles. While it is true that consistency is the keystone to altering a child's behaviour, the reality of always remaining consistent is rarely achievable. Pressures from the external world frequently have adults on the hop. Not only do they find themselves needing to guide a child's routine but also their own to ensure they and the child/children are, for example, out the door by a certain time, arriving at an activity before it is scheduled to begin, or going to sleep to ensure there is enough time to recharge for the upcoming day.

Because there are so many things to be accomplished every day, adults can find themselves exhausted, battling children left, right and centre when routine requests are not followed. Knowing which routine battles to choose can help conserve energy and yield better results in the long-term. For example, some parts of the routine, like getting out of the house on time, are non-negotiable. At the other end of the scale, packing toys away can be met with a little more flexibility. Naturally, non-negotiables vary from adult to adult. Picking battles helps to direct energy where it is needed and support the adult to achieving consistency in the areas it is most needed.

The idea of consistency can also relate to the amount of time given to children to complete tasks. It can become difficult, even when children have not developed a concept of what five or ten minutes means, if the amount of time given to achieve a routine task is inconsistent. If one day they have a flexible timeframe to get dressed they will be less likely to understand the urgency of getting dressed at lightning speed the next. Setting up the same type of timeframe, no matter the urgency schedules dictate, will likely help children to meet routine expectations.

Other difficulties can arise when dealing with children who get lost in the black and white details of conversations. This type of child views the world in absolutes. For example, if they are told that everyone is leaving in five minutes they may become agitated when what has been stated does not occur. The result of failing to meet announced time frames can lead children to believe they have been inadvertently lied to. Alternatively, they may become upset if someone stays behind. Their literal take on the world leads them to believe everyone means just that – everyone. Choosing words carefully with children who have a literal take on the world can help adults avoid unnecessary routine glitches.

A third, but no means final reason influencing success relates to how routines are structured. Asking a child to move from room to room to complete various tasks invites distraction. Children, even those seemingly old enough to know better, can become easily distracted by things that are more appealing, for example, television or playing with toys. Limiting the possible distractions can increase routine success. Having children complete all tasks in one room before moving onto the next can support better outcomes. For

example, getting up, making the bed and getting dressed can, for some children, work better than getting up, making the bed, having breakfast and then returning to the bedroom to get dressed.

A final point relates to drawing awareness towards what tasks children are more likely to require help with or need reminders for. Because adults have their own routines to stick to, it is often difficult to manage their and their child/children's routines simultaneously. While children may be able to complete tasks independently, for example, getting dressed, they may still mess about at these times. Situating them in a place, like the adult's room, where they can be monitored, encouraged and even helped can support adults to avoid routine pitfalls.

The typical glitch times

Some routine segments universally work better than others. Getting out of the house is a typical glitch time, as is bed time. During glitch times, the adult/s implementing the routine might feel like they are up against the wall. Children often resist the idea of what needs to happen during these times, thus meaning that tensions can run higher than normal. Finding ways to keep the energy between the child and adult calm is paramount to success. Raising the energy in negative ways may eventually lead to children doing as they are told, but often there will be an interval separating the beginning and end of the routine, usually resulting in tears and increased frustration.

Consistency levels might also influence the outcome of glitch times. Sounding like a broken record is the typical behaviour needed during glitch time battles. Unfortunately, using strategies like ignoring and hoping for the best rarely work. Falling into the trap of starting, joining in or maintaining a conversation when routines are not being followed typically increases routine delays. Therefore strategies that require an adult to use as few repetitive words as possible will frequently yield greater results.

Summing it up

Routines can be tricky things to implement. Furthermore, some children will follow them more easily than others. Picking battles to accomplish a routine can often lead to greater success. Knowing which routine battles to pursue usually equates to which parts of the routine are and are not negotiable. While flexibility is not a taboo subject, allowing a uniform duration of time to complete routine tasks can help children experience success. The child who has a tendency to view life in black and white may need additional support. Choosing words carefully, ones that take into account that everything stated by the adult can and might be taken in the most literal way imaginable, can help to avoid unwanted routine delays and arguments. Tailoring routines into logical chunks that motivate a child to move towards the end, rather than stall parts of the routine, can also ease adult and child frustration. Adult availability to help with some tasks, as well as offer reminders, can also be another solution. Keeping energy levels between adults and children as calm as possible can prevent routine glitches, as can the degree of consistency applied in reminding children to stay on task. Getting pulled into conversations at times when reminders are a preferred strategy may delay routines now and well into the future.

M.J. Fisher
Child and Family Therapist
B. Soc. Sc.; GradDip Teaching; Dip. Care and Ed.
www.whatmjdoes.com
© What MJ Does