

Routines

Routines are very important for children in order to maintain daily structure, which helps children to feel calm as they can understand what to expect from their day. Through routines, children are able to develop feelings of trust and security, empathy, and independence.

It is a great idea for caregivers with children from **ages 0-3 years** to begin to introduce routines gradually, and with age-appropriate expectations for their child.

For example, a baby at 4 months old will not be able to understand that its bedtime and know how to sooth themselves to sleep, rather this is something that must be taught through repetition and consistency after they are 6 months old. At this time, a baby's routine becomes a lot easier to develop, as sleep training becomes possible due to their new ability to remember patterns through repetition and consistency. Parents will find their baby typically napping once in the morning and once in the afternoon until they are over 1 years old and then often will switch to one afternoon nap.



At 6 months old, babies begin solid foods, starting with one serving a day and working up to 3 meals a day plus snacks, along with continuing breastfeeding or formula until they are 12 months. Being able to have meals together as a family is wonderful for establishing healthy routine for children! As babies become toddlers and begin to show more independence and desire to choose for themselves, caregivers can begin to incorporate their child's personal choice into their routine.

For example, a caregiver could lay out 2 sweaters on the bed and let their 18-month-old choose which one they would like to wear today. Keeping in mind a parent should only give options to things that are in fact optional for the child and not things that are required for health and safety, such as whether they want to wear a seatbelt or not, or whether they want to eat their vegetables or not...giving 2 choices is better than yes or no options. Rather a caregiver could say, "would you like a carrot or a cucumber?" or "we are going outside soon, would you like to go for a walk or play in the backyard?". Giving children these areas of personal choice in their day really helps them to feel respected and empowered and will also help with power struggles caregivers may have with their child.

A helpful tip that I have learned over the years as a parent myself and a home visitor who has worked alongside many parents, is that children love to know what is coming next. For older children, printing or writing out a daily routine may be a helpful strategy, but focusing on ages 0-3, I would recommend keeping it simple by:

1. Give your child time to complete what they are doing before switching to a new activity.
2. Give your child a heads up that you will be changing to something new, such as “it’s clean up time now, and as soon as we’re done, we can go outside!” This helps to transition children much easier from one thing to another and also gives them a chance to get excited for what’s coming, thus hopefully motivating them to do the required task.
3. Be patient and repeat often. Children often don’t hear you the first time, they need repetition. For caregivers this is not always easy but try to be patient because these are skills that are vital for their future years in school and are helping to develop their ability to follow instructions. For verbal children ages 2 and older, it may also be helpful to ask them what they heard. For example, “so after we clean up, what are we doing next?” This helps identify what they’ve heard and what needs to be repeated again.

One final thing to remember, is that routines don’t have to be exact every day. Try to keep the important things like naps and mealtimes relatively the same, but the activities between can absolutely change. Children enjoy variety so include your child in your decisions and allow them to change their minds (because it will happen!)

If a child feels unheard or upset by something during their day and a tantrum or power struggle happens, **stay calm!** They can pick up on your stress, which can escalate their behavior. Take a step back and do your best to see what led up to that behavior. It could be that they didn’t have enough time to transition between activities or maybe they didn’t get what they were hoping for. Whatever the reason, children always have a feeling at the root of their behavior. Something triggered their tantrum, so it’s your job as their caregiver to do your best to find out why. Validate what they are feeling and allow them to have those feelings guilt free.

Be kind to yourself and take a step back when you need to, to regroup, call a friend or grab something to eat. We need to remember to take care of ourselves in order to care of our little ones. Routines should be fun and helpful, rather than stressful and rigid. They can give us a sense of order and structure and help us get through the day, one activity at a time!

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