

Ask a Specialist - The Benefits of Family Routines in Uncertain Times

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What have the last several months looked like for your family? Remote work, remote learning, teaching and tutoring children at home during the pandemic have, at times, tested both students and parents to their limits.

With schools now or soon to be back in session, many families are unsure what it will be like, but are ready to return to a more structured schedule and establish daily routines.

Children may not exactly beg parents to establish routines for school-day mornings, family meals or weekend chores, but every family needs a certain amount of structure to function well. Morning routines can help family members feel prepared for the day and reduce stress. Rushing out the front door with barely enough time to shower, get dressed, eat and grab bags and backpacks can be unnerving.

Infants, teenagers and adults all do best when certain routines are established and they know ahead of time what is expected, when they need to participate and how much time it will take. In other words, routines should be regular, predictable and consistent.

Not all time needs to be closely planned, but families and individuals can benefit from morning, after-school, evening

and bedtime routines. Even weekends go more smoothly with planning.

Weekday morning routine. The website, <https://healthychildren.org>, established by the American Academy of Pediatrics, suggests that family members should know what needs to be done in advance to make the household function well in the morning. They offer the following tips:

- * Put as many things in order as possible the night before.

- * Keep wake-up routines cheerful and optimistic.

- * Be sure your child eats breakfast, even if he or she is not hungry in the morning. It's important to have food in the system to start the day. That goes for grownups too.

- * Pause long enough to say goodbye to your child. A hug goes a long way to help make the day go better.

After school routine. When parents can't be home to welcome children, it's essential that children have a place to stay where they are safe and cared for. The majority of risk-taking, participation in pranks or juvenile delinquent behaviors from children and youth commonly occurs after school when children are unsupervised.

Whether the after-school routine includes staying to participate in school activities or going to a friend's or grandparent's home, children who know they have a safe place to go after school will remain more focused throughout the day. Parents should make every effort to see that a caring adult or responsible teen is available. Even having a close neighbor who is at home and available if needed can help children feel secure.

Mealtime routine. Families should take the time to sit down and have several meals together each week. This should be a positive experience that reinforces that family members care about each other. Family meals can be a time to talk about how everyone's day went and share their favorite part of the day. It may also serve as a time to discuss family plans or how to best support a family member in an upcoming activity.

Bedtime routine. Children, teens, and adults benefit from having an established routine when they can wind down before crawling into bed. Younger children will benefit the most emotionally and physically from repetition each night. If parents allow 30-45 minutes of preparation, children will be calmer and fall asleep more easily. Bedtime should include story time and/or a chance for children and youth to talk about their day with mom or dad. Try to avoid rowdy

activities just before bedtime. Children will be able to establish their own routine as they get older. However, parents should still have older youth stick to an established bed time.

Establishing comfortable and effective routines requires planning, creating a realistic structure and getting all family members to commit to the plan. However, such efforts will pay great dividends in cutting down on disorder and confusion. It may also strengthen the family unit overall, increase children's devotion to their family and provide structure and peace in an unpredictable world.

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