

From a Parent's Perspective

by Roslyn Duffy

— Situation —

"I can't take many more mornings like this!" Four year old Mary's mother continues, "All we've done is fight. Today she wouldn't get up, then she wouldn't come to the table to eat, and finally I had to wrestle with her to get her dressed. I know it is too hot for boots, but they're all she'd put on and I am too worn out to care." With these parting words to her daughter's child care teacher, a very discouraged mom turns to leave for her day at work.

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— Solutions —

It is possible to change a morning battleground into a congenial team effort. Not all mornings will look like a happy TV sitcom but at least they can become much more stress-free. The magic ingredient is *routines*.

Routines are magic because they clearly define expectations. Routines have a sort of extraterrestrial existence of their own. Parents can step back and allow the agreed upon routine to be the boss.

The process of developing a routine is part of the solution. Do not just announce the new routine to a child who is over the age of three. Instead, set up the routine together. (For younger children, talking through a plan while drawing or pasting pictures on a poster works fine.) Find a pleasant time, not at the time of conflict, and ask for your child's help. Explain your frustration with all the fighting each morning. Invite your child to design a morning routine with you. Ask her what needs to happen each morning. Work out details. Put agreements in writing. Colorful posters work well. Children might enjoy cutting out magazine pictures, such as a tube of toothpaste for tooth brushing, to illustrate the steps of the routine. Then place this list or poster in an easily seen spot. Agree to try the routine for a week or two and then discuss it again. At that time, celebrate what is working and fine-tune what is not. Remember to focus on improvement rather than expect perfection. Everyone needs encouragement.

Most of us find ourselves repeating for the tenth time, with increasing volume, frustration, and annoyance, "Turn off that TV!" Instead, act firmly and allow the routine to appear out of the nether world. Calmly turn off the TV and ask, "What is our routine?" or "What happens after you get up each morning?" (Sometimes all that is necessary is to point to the posted routine without saying a word.) The child's initial scream of anguish over the loss of her program changes to a sulky "I get dressed." Though a child may mutter this over an ominously protruding lower lip, the adult's response is simply to offer congratulations that she remembered the routine. SAY NO MORE! A child may still object to getting dressed but she also feels a sense of control because she remembered the routine. This response is mutually respectful. The adult respects the agreed upon routine, she respects her child's ability to remember the routine, and she acts respectfully by turning off the TV rather than demanding that the child turn it off.

What problems do you experience? Send a description, a short word "snapshot" of the situation, to From a Parent's Perspective. Each month, we will address your real life issues. To assure confidentiality, names of those submitting problems will not appear. Elements of several problems may be combined for this column. Only situations appearing in the column receive responses.

— Hints for Morning Success —

1. Expect that everyone be dressed before eating breakfast. This is usually easier than setting up complicated timing systems.
2. Consider not having the TV on in the mornings. This is simpler than disengaging from a program already in progress. Alternately, the TV only goes on after certain tasks (eating, getting dressed, or tooth brushing) take place.
3. Eliminate most morning decision making.
 - Choose clothes the night before.
 - Plan breakfast menus on a weekly basis, or at least the previous night.
 - Gather needed supplies (coats, shoes, lunch boxes), and place them in a designated spot.
4. Involve everyone in meaningful ways. Even young children can set out silverware, carry fruit to the table, or load their cereal bowls into the dishwasher.
5. Decide what you will do when the morning runs afoul, rather than what you will make (or try to make) your child do. Tell your child what to expect.
 - I will turn off the TV if it is on when it should not be.
 - I will place shoes or jackets in the car if they are not on when it is time to leave.
 - I will put breakfast things away at (specific time).
6. Resist the temptation to use stickers or rewards with routines. Rewards defeat the long range goals of developing feelings of capability and responsibility, and they dilute a child's sense of self-worth.

Remember — *This morning began last night.*

Are you prepared? Are you organized? Are you both well rested?

Use routines! — Have a great day!