Structure in Our Lives: What? Why? How?

from a parent's perspective

by Roslyn Duffy

– Situation –

Backfiring Bedtime

I wanted my daughter to respond to her own body's rhythms by allowing her to fall asleep when she was ready to do so. This plan is backfiring. Often it is midnight before she goes to sleep — most often on the sofa or in front of the television. I am more than ready to fall into bed by 10 pm. She is getting heavy to carry. I have no time to myself. How can I turn this around without a battle?

A Cave-Dwelling Future

We took our four year old to the museum. He ran up and down the aisles, grabbed at the sculptures and tugged on the displayed wall hangings. As soon as we got home, I sent him to his room for a time out. I am still upset. We can't take him anywhere. I feel like we might as well become cave-dwellers!

Dirty Dish Disaster

My husband and I agreed that our sons (5 and 6 years) are old enough to help clear the table after dinner. The problem is that if they don't do so —my husband ignores it and then tells me I am making it into too big an issue if I persist in trying to get them to do it. I am very frustrated — and I'm stuck with all the dirty dishes.

– Solution –

Structure to the Rescue

Structure is something that may make people squirm but all of the above scenarios are about *structure* — or its absence. *Structure* is a combination of three things: *Routines and Habits*; *Needs and Expectations*; and *Follow-Through.* Each of these is a component for developing resilient families.

Routines/Habits

Things that occur on a regular basis, at a regular time, or in a consistent way are *routines*. Eating breakfast and going to bed are both *routines.*

Routines become *habits* when they happen often enough to be done without conscious thought. When I get ready for bed each night, I place my glasses on my dresser. Same place — same time — same action, over and over and over again. That is a *routine* that has matured, along with my eyesight, into a *habit.*

When a child enters the house and places his coat on a coat peg — day after day, same place, same action — it, too, has become a *habit*. These are useful habits. When another child tosses his coat on the floor as soon as he walks through the door — day after day — he also has a *habit*, but not a very desirable one.

Habits are a bit like rabbits — good or bad, they multiply.

The Brain Connection

The reason *habits* and *routines* go together is wired into our brains. Brains are programmed to regard things that are new, different, or unusual as suspicious — this can result in resistance.

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When a child is asked to do something, even something familiar, it can still bring resistance if that request comes only intermittently. Of course, it can also be a bid for attention, in which case ignoring the unwanted behavior and applauding the desired one could be the best first step. Establishing *routines* requires patience, planning, and persistence — while turning *routines* into *habits* takes lots of follow-through.

Starting a Routine

The more involved everyone is in planning a change, the higher the level of participation will be. Hanging up a coat may be mom's idea; but deciding where to locate the coat hook, helping to decorate a name tag for that coat hook, or practicing how to get the coat to stay on the hook are all ways in which children can be involved and feel more included. Those feelings will translate into improved cooperation.
The mom with the midnight marvel who won't go to bed might not get a cheer for suggesting a fixed bedtime, but working on a plan for a bedtime routine ("Routines," *Child Care Information Exchange*, November/December 1996) can ease the transition. Here's a glimpse:

"Before bed we need to do what?"
"Brush teeth, read stories, and say prayers."

Great! Now use markers, crayons, or magazine cut-outs to illustrate this plan with: pictures of smiles or toothbrushes; books; and praying hands, prayer rugs, or meditation bells. Let your child use this chart as a guide to walk through the nightly *routine*, which ends up with her in bed.

Sleeping will be up to her, but getting her there in a consistent way through a nightly routine will become easier as her brain ceases to find the process novel. Over time the *routine* will become a *habit* — and part of the child's natural body rhythm, but now a rhythm the whole family will find restful.

Advance Warning

Prepare the brain for change. If you want your child to clear the table, ask him whether he wants to clear the leftovers or the dishes. Do this *before* the meal is over. This reminds him of the task and reinforces the establishment of the routine, and the choice gives him a feeling of power in the situation. It is also a great way to avoid a power struggle and gain cooperation.

Needs and Expectations

The family preparing to hole up in their cave rather than take their child anywhere ever again will find another type of *structure* helpful. The missing *structure* in their museum adventure may have been that of communicating the *needs and expectations* of the situation ahead of time.

For very young children or a first time experience for any child, a direct explanation is needed. *"The museum exhibits are fragile. It is not okay to touch the things on display."*

Once a child is four or older, he or she has probably gone out into public enough to be able to respond to questions instead of being told.

"When we are at the museum — how do we need to act?

Give clues within the question,
"Is running allowed?"
"How do we move inside a museum?"
"What are we allowed to touch?"

The value of asking such questions, rather than droning out the rules, is that by responding a child demonstrates both knowledge and understanding (which makes it hard to pretend later that he didn't hear or doesn't know them). This is a very handy feature!

Follow-Through

The final element of structure is that old *'do what you say you will do'*. This gets tricky when we meet with resistance and disappointment (aka — a tantrum). The somewhat grim truth is that "parenting" and "popular" are not synonyms.

Let's be honest, if there were a possibility that fussing, whining, or acting incompetent might get us out of doing a task — well, it would be worth a try, wouldn't it? Wouldn't we all try to get out of unappealing tasks if we thought we could? (All right, someone out there is saying *"Not me"* but the rest of us won't invite that someone to OUR birthday parties — so there!)

The point is that if we want children to *believe* what we say — we have to *mean* what we say. It also means that we better be careful of what we say. The biggest danger here is saying what we are going to make someone else do (an unlikely possibility at best). Better to stick with what you can control — namely, your own actions.

What Will YOU Do?

If the table doesn't get cleared — have a contingency plan. The key to success here is focusing on what YOU will do. Perhaps you agreed that the television wouldn't go on until after the table is cleared. Then YOU turn off the set while saying, "The table isn't cleared." YOU stay calm. YOU act.

If this does not work and your child chooses to sulk instead of doing the task — continue to stay calm. Breathe. Give him a reasonable amount of time to comply — but no further reminders. Then clear the table yourself and — the television stays off.

If (Ha! When!) there are complaints — assure your child that you are confident he will remember to do his job tomorrow and be able to enjoy his programs then.

Whose behavior did you control? YOURS. Who chose NOT to clear the table? He did. Will he clear the table tomorrow? Probably.

Follow-through nurtures *habits.*

Flexibility

Successful *structure* has the qualities of an earthquake-proof building. When the night's routine gets rattled, it should be able to bend without cracking. Bedtime after a birthday party may be an hour or more late or there may be no time for a story on some nights.

Habits can falter without disintegrating. Missing one night of tooth brushing does not mean a denture savings account needs be established.

If *needs* change or *expectations* have to be altered, the walls of our life's structure will not tumble. A museum visit can be shortened if a child becomes overtired or hungry.

When *follow-through* turns into a power struggle — it can serve as a warning that the basic *structure* may need some shoring up. Check that it is YOUR actions YOU are controlling.

Support and Freedom

Routines might seem boring — but they reduce resistance and lead to positive *habits.*

Needs and expectations might seem obvious — but they aren't. They need reiteration.

Follow-through may feel unpleasant — but it still needs to happen.

Well designed, structure supports and frees by building resilience.
Sweet dreams. Happy travels.
Peaceful meals.

What problems do you experience?
Send a description, a short word "snapshot"
of the situation.
Each issue, 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.