

The Importance of Routines for Kids

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It's commonly understood that routines are good for children and support their development. However, in uncertain times like these, families are working hard to figure out...what's essential about routines for their young children? Why do they matter and what kind of characteristics matter most? Unlocking these secrets will help families adapt to changing and uncertain times.



Why routines matter

Research shows that routines support healthy social emotional development in early childhood. In particular, children with regular routines at home have self-regulation skills, the building blocks of good mental health. When children learn to regulate feelings and behaviors, it means they are able to identify their feelings and have skills to manage those feelings so that they don't feel overwhelmed. Young children who learn to do this well are better able to adapt to everyday challenges, stressors, and new expectations. Children do not learn to do this all at once. Just as when a child is learning other important skills, like reading and writing, self-regulation is a set of skills that build over time. Every stage includes age-appropriate milestones and important things parents can do to coach children from one stage into the next.

There are many parenting behaviors that are important. These include talking about feelings with your child and helping your child respond to his feelings in ways that feel right for your family—such as by taking deep breaths or getting hugs. Parents can also provide structure and support routines for children. When children live in organized and predictable environments, they learn to self-regulate in organized and predictable ways, leading to optimal mental health over time.

What about routines matter

Often parents hear the word routine and imagine it is a proxy for schedule or even more generally structure. Those constructs are similar, but routines require a particular set of characteristics for children to be most developmentally supportive: predictability and accessibility. Children benefit from relationships and environments that are predictable to them: this includes important caregivers who behave in predictable ways, and events that occur at predictable times. For example, many studies demonstrate the benefit of bedtime routines and dinnertime routines. Children can anchor their day according to these expected interactions with their families. Furthermore, these are routine moments that provide a high level of accessibility to children. Not only can children know easily when and how they will occur, but even young children can often participate in these routines in meaningful ways by helping to set the table at dinnertime or choose their own book to read with a parent at bedtime.

A special kind of a routine, a ritual, adds an additional layer to the significance of predictable family experiences. Rituals are routines that also impart a sense of family identity and promote connection among family members. Rituals give children a growing sense of themselves as a member of a greater whole which promotes positive developmental outcomes. In addition, the joy that families experience inside of rituals together can leave an “emotional residue” that children keep with them to cope during stressful times. When times are uncertain, and children experience worry or sadness, rituals provide the internal sense that they are not alone and have a balance in their lives of positive and negative experiences.

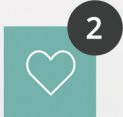
How parents can adapt routines during the current crisis

Many parents are struggling to adapt their children's routines in the current crisis. Without school, family, and regular activities, parents are aware their children still need structure. Here are some tips to incorporate the most significant features of routines into your children's current lives.



Routines and Rules

As described, children most need to know what to expect each day at home. One way to do that is by creating a schedule. However, for some children, overly defined schedules may increase anxiety, especially if the transitions between segments seem artificial. If you find a true schedule is not working for your family, try a morning meeting during which priorities are set for the day and general timeframes are created for blocks of activity. Keep in mind that doing just a couple of things each day in the same way to create anchors is the most important thing for young children. For example, make sure at least one meal, and preferably the same meal each day, occurs at about the same time and is a chance for all family members (as is possible) to sit together without distractions. Think carefully about household rules and while you may be tempted at this time to relax expectations, be firm with rules that matter most in the long-term for your family. For example, you may decide to relax rules about how neat the house is or how much TV your children are allowed to watch, but rules about safety and kindness should never be unclear to children.



Relationships

Children don't need perfect parents to thrive, but they do need predictable parents. While you may be spending lots of time overall with your children right now, consider how predictable your focused attention is for them. Their development is best supported by fewer but more focused moments of positive interaction than attempts at sustaining distracted attention throughout the day. Likewise, managing your own worries in order to support their mental health does not mean suppressing your feelings. Rather, think about your own stress and coping as a complete loop. Show your children that they can count on you to feel what you feel and transparently adopt healthy coping strategies to manage those feelings when they come up.



Rituals

Many families already have rituals in place without realizing their power: Taco Tuesdays, Sunday church services, and Saturday movie nights. Rituals can occur daily or less frequently. If you have a good one in place, take this opportunity while at home to observe if it has an impact on your family. Do you notice a family connection occurring during this time? You may also take this time to invent new family rituals. It is key that they occur at the same time and place, that they involve all family members, and that they impart a positive emotional connection. Research shows that rituals buffer the impact of stress and trauma on mental health. Furthermore, rituals that connect children to previous generations may be particularly impactful. It's a great time to reinvent a special ritual from your own childhood with your children.

Salvador Minuchin, a famous family therapy scholar, said, "Only the family, society's smallest unit, can change and yet maintain enough continuity to rear children who will not be 'strangers in a strange land,' who will be rooted firmly enough to grow and adapt." Each family has the capacity to support their children's adaptation with positive routines and powerful connections.