

## LETTING ROUTINE BE THE BOSS

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If you're a parent of a school-aged child you may be feeling both excited for school to start and apprehensive. While the children will be back at school and engaged, back-to-school also means back to busy schedules and long days. Sometimes just getting out of the house in the morning can be a monumental victory.

Creating routines for and with children is essential for building a sense of security and well being. Children need routines to give them a sense of control and freedom. Routines allow children to predict what's next and to make choices on how they will respond to what's going to happen based on their past experience. It gives them a sense of healthy control and ability to self-regulate. For a family, routines outline a clear set of expectations and follow-through.

Sometimes adults see routines as limiting freedom and spontaneity. However, children who have routines and are included in creating those routines are often more spontaneous than children who don't. Brain research now tells us that we look for patterns in everything we do, from playing and school work to daily routines. Routines actually allow children more freedom because they are able to determine the limits around them and then make decisions within those limits. Adults also feel more comfortable allowing children freedom when clearly defined limits are set. You can clearly see an example of this in the use of baby gates for toddlers. The baby gate restricts movement into an area that may be dangerous for a child, but gives the child freedom within the limits that were set by the adult. The adult now knows that the child is safe within those limits and they are more likely to let the child explore and move freely within those limits.

Routines also give adults a much needed rest from having to be the boss all the time. When routines are the boss, children learn to become independent within the limits that are set, and the parents are freed up to enjoy their children instead of controlling them.

Creating a family atmosphere where routine is the boss allows children to become independent both practically and emotionally. It also frees up parents to step out of the exhausting role of controlling their children to working with them cooperatively.

While it is important for adults to set the routines for younger children (ages 0-3), children older than three can be involved in creating the routines with their family, and this is extremely helpful in gaining buy-in from them, which then leads to greater cooperation. This also empowers the children to become part of the solution, and gives them a real sense of belonging and significance within their family. To do this, use a family meeting setting have children discuss the problems that the family encounters during a particular time. For instance, if morning routines are creating stress in the family, discuss how it is affecting everyone involved (you'll often be surprised how children have some of the same concerns that we do). Then, brainstorm different ideas on how to structure a routine that will solve the problems (be sure not to criticize anyone's ideas, as one person's crazy idea may be the inspiration for a really effective solution). Decide together what the routine is going to look like. If your children are younger, you can use limited choices to guide the discussion; "Should we make our beds before or after breakfast?"

Once the routines are set, consider creating a chart. Younger children can use pictures to guide them through a routine chart. When children break the established routine (which they will), the parent can simply guide the children back to their routines when they break them by asking, "What's next on the routine chart?", or "What was our agreement?" You'll be surprised how willing children are to cooperate when you follow through if they've been a part of the creation of the routine. It is also often wise to establish routines where the more gratifying parts of the routine come last. For instance in our house we eat breakfast after the beds are made. That way if one of our boys doesn't make his bed we can simply remind him when he asks for breakfast that

beds get made before we eat.

As the director of a school which serves children from ages 2.5 to 14, I hear back from parents all the time how creating routines with their children has really increased the level of cooperation within their family and taught their children valuable time management skills. I hope you find the same!