



Routines Summary

Why Routines?

Routines not only help your family move through the day smoothly and on time, they can have a significant impact on your child's success. Three-to-four-year-olds are eager to explore and test boundaries as they make sense of how things work. Routines can provide structure and repetition that makes their world easier to understand. Routines can be especially helpful to support transitions from one activity or place to another.

Tip These steps are best done when you and your child are not tired or in a rush

Tip Intentional communication and actively building a healthy parent relationship will support these steps.

Step 1. Get Your Child Thinking by Getting Their **Input**

- Consider your routines throughout the day - morning, mid-day, and bedtime. Creating routines around wakeup time, mealtime, naptime, bedtime, trips back and forth to child care, checking the mailbox, and going to the grocery store can make these times predictable, comforting, and fun for your child.
 - *"Would you like to brush your teeth before or after your bath?" "What song would you like me to sing before you fall asleep?"*
 - When coming into your home, for example, you might always take off your shoes near the front door. Your child will watch you and may start doing the same thing. In fact, they might firmly object if you decide to leave your shoes on one day. Involve your child in this routine by offering choices like *"Would you like to put your shoes on the mat next to the door or in the basket?"*
- Each time there is an opportunity, ask your child, *"What do you notice? How do you feel?"* If your child is feeling unsure about how to describe their emotions when a routine changes, consider asking questions, naming what you notice, and leaving plenty of quiet space after your questions so they have an opportunity to share their ideas.
 - *"How did you feel when I told you we were going to do something different today?"*
 - *"I noticed you brought your book with you to grandma's house so we could still do that part of our bedtime routine."*

- *"I noticed you felt better when you saw that grandma has the same kind of night light that we do."*
- *"How do you feel right now?"*
- When reading books, point out routines that seem comforting and moments when those routines changed. Ask, *"How do you think that character is feeling? What happened when his day changed?"*

Tip Your child will give you lots of cues about whether the routines you develop feel too complicated or too simple and if they are being followed consistently enough for your child to feel a sense of security. Every child is different, and your own child may change from day-to-day in how willing they are to follow a routine or how much help they need to manage planned and unplanned changes in routines.

Step 2. Teach New Skills by Interactive Modeling

- Teach your child how to perform the routine. Particularly if there are new responsibilities or challenges, be sure that you've tried those steps out together first.
 - There is a simple process called interactive modeling that teachers use, which can also be a powerful teaching tool for parents.¹
 - Say what you will model or demonstrate and why.
 - Model or demonstrate the behavior.
 - Ask your child what they noticed.
 - Invite your child to try it.
 - Ask what they noticed with their own modeling.
 - Practice together.
 - Provide specific feedback starting with strengths using "I notice..." statements
- Make your thinking and emotions explicit: *"I love that we always read stories before going to bed. It is one of my favorite times of the day because I get to spend time with you."*
- Talk aloud about the ways in which you respond to your own big feelings: *"It made me feel so much better to tell you how I was feeling and to ask for help."*
- Grow confidence. *"I noticed that you knew to get the bedtime story while I was getting out the toothbrush and toothpaste. You knew what to expect next and you were ready for it."* When something is different you might say, *"I noticed that you knew that we left our usual bedtime story at the neighbor's house and you just picked up a different one. You did not look worried at all about trying something new. You knew how to handle that change, and it was not a big deal at all."*
- If your child is worried about a change in routine and uses definitive language like, "We always read the other book," you may respond with:
 - *"This is something different from our usual routine, and I know we can do it."*
 - *"Do you remember last time when we didn't have your favorite pajamas, and you had to wear something different to bed? You seemed disappointed at first, but then you took a deep breath and were able to do it."*
 - *"I wonder if we can do something that will help us get through this challenge?"*

Step 3. **Practice** to Grow Skills and Develop Habits

- Learn about your child's development.
- Engage in routines together like picking up toys before snacktime or putting away your shoes when you come inside.
- Initially, practice may require more teaching, but avoid taking over and doing it for your child.
- Once your routines feel comfortable and consistent, provide opportunities for your child to change the routine. *"I've noticed that you really enjoy going to story time at the library on Tuesdays. We have enough time to check out some books after story time this week. Do you think we should find two books we would like to check out and take home?"* The goal is to feel a sense of security from being able to predict what happens each day and to feel comfortable with change.
- Use your child's dolls or stuffed animals to act out your routine, especially if it is new or if it is changing. For example, if a cousin is coming to visit and will be doing the routines with you, you can act out that change with dolls and stuffed animals. *"What will happen when your cousin comes to visit? I wonder if his routine is different? Maybe we could ask him what his routine is like."*
- If there is part of a routine that is not working, talk with your child about ways that you might change your plan for it to work better. *"It seems to take a really long time for you to decide which books to read for bedtime. I am usually feeling tired then, and it is hard for me to be patient while you choose. Is there something we can do to help you choose the books more quickly? Could we choose them in the morning? What do you think we should try tonight?"*

Step 4. **Support** Your Child's Development and Success

- Use "Show me..." statements like *"Show me what the next step is when we are getting ready for lunchtime."*
- Don't move on quickly if your child shows interest in trying something new. Children often need more time to stick with a challenge or pursue a goal. Be sure to wait long enough for your child to show you they are competent. Your waiting could make all the difference in whether they are able to gain skills over time.
- Recognize effort by using "I notice..." statements like: *"I noticed how you got your toothbrush out of the drawer as part of our morning routine. I love seeing that."*
- On days with extra challenges, routines can feel especially comforting. When the house is full of visitors, and there are a lot of changes in your normal routine, offer to let your child teach everyone your good morning song or to take a walk around the neighborhood using the same path you normally use.
- Actively reflect on how your child is feeling when they have mastered a routine or when they are facing a change. You can offer reflections like:
 - *"I see you have the breakfast spoons ready. You know exactly what to expect next."* Naming their success will help to build confidence.
 - *"Taking this bus to the store feels different than the one we usually take. There are different signs on the walls and new things to notice. Let's look at them together."* Noticing your child's concerns and coming up with strategies for facing them will help your child know that you are there to help them get through this change.

Step 5. **Recognize** Effort and Quality to Foster Motivation

- Recognize and call out when it is going well. *“I see you noticed that it is time to check the mailbox and you got out your shoes and the mail bag. You know exactly how to get ready for this routine.”*
- Recognize small steps along the way: *“You got out your pajamas for bed. I like seeing that!”*
- Build celebrations into your everyday routine. Promote joy and happiness by laughing, singing, dancing, hugging, and snuggling to appreciate one another.

References

1. Wilson, M.B. (2012). [Interactive modeling: A powerful technique for teaching children](#). Turners Falls, MA: Northeast Foundation for Children.

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