

# 5 Ways to Get Structure Back Into Your Kids' Lives

School has begun, here's how to reintroduce routines.



By **Christina Caron**

Sept. 2, 2020

This is not a lecture about the benefits of setting up a daily routine. Most parents already know that kids thrive on structure.

Before the pandemic, when we could leave the house without worrying about contracting a potentially deadly virus, we had all sorts of routines. But things are different now. The stressors are compounding and many families have let certain rules slide.

“The normal or typical things that break up your day no longer exist,” said Carolyn Moriarty, a licensed clinical social worker in the San Francisco Bay Area who works for the Child Mind Institute, a nonprofit that provides therapy and other services to children and families with mental health and learning disorders. “Time has become almost like an abstract concept.”

---

**NYT PARENTING:** *Get evidence-based guidance, plus personal stories and tiny victories from other parents.*

[Sign Up](#)

For a lot of kids, the usual summer activities like camp or swimming lessons didn't happen, and as a result, family schedules have become looser. If you're struggling to get your kids ready in the morning or to maintain some semblance of consistency each day, you're not alone.

We spoke to two teachers, a psychologist, a child development researcher and a licensed clinical social worker to find out how parents can add structure and routines back into their children's school days when school itself is different.

## Avoid multitasking and offer lots of encouragement instead

When easing back into a routine after a long hiatus, it may be tempting to multitask in the morning. But this can easily backfire.

If you tell your son to sit and eat his cereal while you leave to get dressed in the bedroom, you may later emerge to find your child no longer sitting at the table but in his room playing with toys; the cereal is now soggy.

Instead of doing two things at once, it's best for parents to be fully present for the first two weeks of a new routine until it becomes more of a habit, advised Jamie Howard, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute in New York City. Maybe this means that you take your shower after dropping off your kids at school or wait until after their remote learning session has started.

During the morning routine, stay near your kids and give them choices. This will keep the routine moving along and also provide them with a sense of control: Do you want to wear a dress with leggings or a T-shirt with pants? Do you want cereal or a waffle?

Then offer positive reinforcement: "It makes me happy to see you eating your breakfast."

Positive reinforcement can help kids stay motivated instead of resorting to inertia.

Lisa Moore, a sixth-grade math teacher at Washington Latin Public Charter School in Washington, D.C., and mother of four, said that parents shouldn't hesitate to "celebrate everything."

"Celebrate the first day. Celebrate that you brushed your teeth," she said. This strategy is especially important when establishing routines with children who are learning to do things by themselves, she added.

Helping your child master a few important tasks with consistency is better than struggling to manage several new things, Moore added.

## Keep it simple

When starting a new routine, think about the one thing your family can do to add structure to your day.

"Pick the low-hanging fruit," Dr. Howard said. "What's easiest to start implementing?"

For example, if you typically stop working at 5:30 p.m., and you're fortunate enough to work from home, you might decide it's easiest to focus on your dinner routine and plan to have dinner on the table every day by 6:30 p.m.

"Whatever natural breaks in the day emerge, you can start there," Dr. Howard said.

For some families, the bedtime routine will be the best place to start. Sleep is the foundation of everything, and if your child's sleep schedule has been disrupted, that's something you'll want to address right away. A well-rested child will be much more amenable to other kinds of routines.

"The important thing that I tell parents is you need to get your kid to bed at the same time every day," said Jadelyn Chang, a kindergarten teacher at Foster City Elementary School in Foster City, Calif. "Kids really thrive in a very structured environment."

Again, start small.

If an early bedtime isn't working, Moore suggested waking up your child a little earlier every day for about a week.

"You can't force your child to go to sleep but you can wake them up," Moore said.

Dr. Howard suggested using a visual aide, like a poster board, and writing down the routine. For younger kids, draw pictures of it. And then show the new routine to your kids at night to make sure they're primed to follow it the next day.

For remote learners, a sample routine could be: Wake up; put on clothes; eat breakfast; brush hair and teeth; and then log into school at 7:55 a.m.

"You want to keep it simple and not too detailed," Dr. Howard said. "You can try it on a weekend to do a dry run."

## Expect resistance and counter it

If your child is still rejecting parts of the routine, don't worry. Sometimes it's a matter of giving your child more autonomy. Reinforcing a child's ability to make choices is important, said Kimberly Updegraff, Ph.D., a professor of family and human development at Arizona State University.

"I think there's often resistance to change," Dr. Updegraff said. "There's going to be a readjustment period."

You can also try engaging children in the process of creating the new routine, so that you get the buy-in from them, she added. If you have a kid in elementary school, for example, you might ask her to help you create a poster that shows the various tasks she needs to accomplish every morning.

"It gives them some part of the process," Dr. Updegraff said. "And they're probably more likely to abide by those plans."

Alternatively, you can create a new routine that helps your children become more independent.

“Every child of every age can do something, whether it’s putting toys away or making themselves a very simple bowl-of-cereal lunch,” Moriarty said.

Sometimes that means that “they will make a mess,” she added. “They are learning.” Encouraging them to meet that goal “will wind up helping the entire family.”

If your kid is rebelling against part of the routine and doesn’t, for example, want to brush her teeth, try breaking down that task into smaller parts, advised Dr. Howard. Instead of telling your child for the umpteenth time to brush her teeth, ask her to climb on her step stool. When she does, thank her for listening. Then tell her to put the toothpaste on her toothbrush. Comment on the clean job she did. And so on.

If your child still doesn’t want to brush, “You calmly say, ‘It’s not a choice, we’re starting something new,’” Dr. Howard said.

## Carve out a consistent remote learning space for your child

In Moore’s sixth-grade classroom, which is fully remote this school year, she noticed the kids will often express enthusiasm for the little things that make their home work space unique, like a new pencil case or a special lamp.

Giving children a consistent work space that they can feel ownership of is an important part of establishing a routine when school is mostly online. But, Moore added, don’t end up using the bed, which should be reserved for sleep. This strengthens the association between bed and bedtime.

For families who don’t have space for children to have their own work space for remote schooling, consider using the same seat and spot at the dining room table or some other consistent work surface. As long as this same space has been set up for school work each day and is free of clutter, it will be much easier for your child to get into school mode, the experts said.

This consistency will become especially important for kids in a hybrid learning environment whose routines will be different on different days.

## Give yourself grace, but stay consistent

During this pandemic, parents need to cut themselves some slack.

“There’s nothing that’s going to create tension in a household faster than instituting a new schedule,” Moriarty said.

It's OK if your child doesn't brush her teeth on a couple of occasions. But don't let a few setbacks discourage you from sticking to the routine. To succeed in establishing a structured day you need to stay consistent in setting expectations and guiding your children. And parents need to be in control of their own schedules as much as possible to model the importance of a routine for their kids.

Sometimes you'll need a Plan B when Plan A blows up.

Say that a work obligation pops up and you cannot eat lunch with your kids as planned at noon. In that case, if you have younger kids, maybe Plan B is letting your kids have a picnic on the floor while you focus on your job, Moriarty suggested. That way the break in their routine might lead to less disappointment.

"It's something that they wouldn't be allowed to do normally," she said.

Moriarty noted that this is also an opportunity to model an important life skill for your children: flexibility.

"It is a time to really be kind to yourself as a parent and also be kind to your child," she added. "Everything is hard right now. We need to acknowledge that as much as we can."