

Morning Routine...It Doesn't Have to be Painful

By Jill Crawford, LCSW

With the new school year just underway, familiar complaints are beginning to roll in from the families I see about the challenges of getting through morning routine. This period of time—from wake-up to out-the-door—is almost universally taxing for families with children of all ages. In often less than an hour, families (children and parents alike) can go from a state of calm to such conflict and stress that, by the time everyone parts ways, each individual is embarking on his or her day feeling upset, angry, and anxious, which is obviously an unpleasant way to get things started. Fortunately, much of this stress can be *anticipated* and, better yet, *prevented*. Here are a few tips to get you started:

***PREPARE** as much as possible for the next day before going to bed at night. Have kids get their belongings together, homework complete and tucked in folders, permission slips signed, and backpacks packed and sitting by the door. Have lunches packed and ready to go. For the fashion-finicky child, encourage them to lay out their clothes the night before. This can reduce the number of precious minutes spent waffling in indecisiveness in front of the closet. Also, keep shoes by the door. The time it takes to locate that one pesky missing shoe can be the difference between making the bus and needing a ride. Prepare, prepare, prepare!

***LIGHTS OUT** at a reasonable hour. The more rested your children (and you) are, the easier it will be to wake up on time and proceed through morning routine in a reasonably pleasant mood. Getting your teens to comply with an earlier bedtime may be tough, but rather than turning it into a power struggle, try pointing out (gently) the correlation between increased sleep and improved mood, energy, and productivity. At the very least, promote a deadline by which they're in their room, without electronics, resting peacefully doing something like reading or listening to quiet music. This is a great way for kids and adults alike to wind down and relax before going to sleep.

***ALARMS** for everyone. Much of the family conflict that occurs during morning routine begins with the "simple" act of a parent attempting to wake a child and motivate him or her to get out of bed. In my experience, parents often have to return to the sleeping (or just stubborn) child multiple times, resulting in increased stress/frustration for both parties. Alarm clocks foster independence and extricate the parent from the wake-up process. Kids tend to rise more quickly when left to their own devices, and if they don't, well, those consequences are another topic for another day. There is no reason that a child as young as 5 (kindergarten) cannot wake up to an alarm. Younger children will be very proud of their independence, and this builds good habits for years to come. The older ones may be motivated by the idea that such independence demonstrates personal responsibility, and this contributes to trust-building and thus them achieving the social freedoms they are no doubt vying for.

***BE REALISTIC** about how much time you and your family will need to complete your morning routine each morning. We all want to squeeze in as many zzzz's as possible, and this can often lead to a situation where you're running late before you've even gotten out of bed... Which leads to rushing around... Which leads to stress and agitation... Which leads to snapping at one another...and on it goes. Consider increasing your allotted get-ready time by 10% to cut down on the anxiety that comes with rushing.

***PRIORITIZE WISELY.** Each of us has our own to-do list in the morning, and there is a smart, efficient way to tackle the list, and then a not so smart, not so efficient way. If your kids like to linger over

breakfast in front of the TV, and tend to get absorbed in what they're watching, you can assume that pulling them away from that to go brush their teeth or get dressed will not only be a challenge, but may also lead to conflict. Insist that they take care of all their other tasks before sitting down in front of the TV. Same with any other electronics or leisure activities your child likes to do before school. They will move through the other items on their list much more smoothly if the "reward" awaits them at the end, rather than getting it at the beginning and then having to give it up for less preferred tasks.

***KEEP THINGS LIGHT.** Morning routine is not the optimal time to broach heavy topics or unpleasant conversations with your children. The key to moving everyone toward the door in a timely fashion is keeping the mood energetic, optimistic, and hopeful about what the day will bring. If you're not up for being a cheerleader at that hour, at least aim for neutral. Kids feed off their parents' demeanor, and if you're having trouble regulating your emotions, they will most likely struggle with theirs as well.

Happy trails, families, and best wishes for a wonderful fall!

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