Parenting Exchange
Morning Routine #1 Library

by Karen Stephens

Routines:
Start Mornings Off on the Right Foot

For most parents, morning *take-offs* can be chaotic. Whether you're getting the kids off to child care or school, scooting everyone out the door on time often seems more like a race than a relaxed, regular routine. But getting everyone on their way is only part of the challenge. Making sure everyone has what they need — on the day they need it — is the real brainteaser. The details to remember multiply exponentially as children get older and become involved in more activities. And, need I say, the more kids you have, the bigger the hurdle.

There will always be some mornings that will make you want to pull your hair out. That's just the nature of a lively family on the go. But with some organization and pre-planning, the mad-dash can be replaced with smoother sailing.

Following are steps to think about. Try out the ones that fit your family best. They can pave the way to morning relief for everyone.

> "Create a family ritual that signals morning wake-up."

- Reflect on your morning routine goals. What needs to be done? How it can be accomplished? As a family, sit down and talk about how your morning should flow and what needs to be accomplished. Setting clear expectations and helping children see what needs to be achieved helps them cooperate more easily.
- Be a good role model. Consistently follow the routine. If something doesn't work, go back to the drawing board to make adjustments. Whatever you do, be organized, efficient and relaxed yourself. Children will gracefully learn to become responsible and reliable by following your lead.
- Practice good time management. Consolidate chores that distract you during morning routines. For instance, if you commute in a carpool or on the train, catch up on letters, bills, newsletters, or grocery lists then.
- Start mornings off well rested. Make sure everyone gets a good night's sleep regularly, not just on weekends. Preschoolers need about 11 hours of sleep nightly. School-age children need 9 hours. Parents, you need 8 hours. It will give you the stamina, energy and good mood you need to get through the day.
- Organize and prepare the night before. Many of us are groggy in the morning, so naturally we move slower. Prepare whatever you can the night before. Include the kids in making decisions and involve them in preparations. For instance, together lay out everyone's clothes for the next day, make lunches, sign permission forms and put in backpacks, and set the table for morning breakfast. Most parents give children baths at night, but if a quick morning shower gets your child moving faster, try that.
- Get up before the kids (unless your family has been blessed with a 5 a.m. riser!). When you get yourself ready first, your mind will be alert and your hands free to help the kids. If the children wake while you're getting ready, keep them safely occupied with a short video or computer game, drawing paper and markers, puzzles, reading, or playing with the family pet.
- Create a family ritual that signals morning wake-up. It can be as traditional or as creative as you like. Personally, I'm a fan of the simple kiss on the cheek. It eloquently says, "Welcome to a new day, my dear one." Some families play music; from reggae to classical — it's the ritual that counts, so use what your family likes. To provide some morning cozy time, you can turn bedtime stories into breakfast stories. The kids listen as they munch away.
- Plan easy ways to carry personal belongings. You'll never leave the house without items in tow for everyone. Provide each child with a different colored and labeled

backpack or canvas bag. For loose items, such as crayons or pencils, a small, clear plastic toolbox is great.

- Set the stage for organization. Whether it's a cardboard box hand-decorated by the kids or a snazzy wooden shelf, identify a specific storage area for each child. That's where they should keep personal items that will come and go with them. It can be in their room or near the door. Make children responsible for keeping their space organized.
- Use visual cues to coach kids in the routine. Create a poster listing the steps for smooth mornings. For young children, illustrate the list with drawings or actual photographs of the kids going through the steps. Ask children to help make the poster. For instance, older siblings can write the words, preschoolers can paste or tape on photographs.
- Use *to do* checklists for each child. Some families use a handy erasable message board — usually displayed in the heart of the home: the kitchen. For each child, the board lists morning tasks to accomplish. Before leaving, check off all items. At day's end, it's erased for a fresh start the next morning. *To do* checklists can include: use restroom and wash hands; make bed; eat breakfast; brush teeth; wash face and hands; brush hair, put on clothes and shoes; grab coat and backpack. If you have pets, assign someone the morning feeding, too. And by all means, don't forget to list the most important thing: a hug and kiss goodbye!
- Share the load. Delegate morning tasks according to the child's age and development to pave the way for success. For instance, children can reach their own clothes or back packs more easily when they on hung on child-height clothing rods or hooks. This helps build self-help skills, independence, and organization. Some large families assign color-codes to socks, underwear, and even dresser drawers. It makes kids' dressing times more efficient.

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- Ask older siblings to help younger children. Older siblings can be in charge of making sure preschooler's teeth are brushed, faces washed and hair combed after breakfast.
- Help kids *hear* deadline cues. Set a timer so kids can *hear* when they have 5 minutes to take-off. Some parents think an alarm clock for wake up is too harsh for children, but some kids like the adult feel of it — you decide.
- Establish and consistently enforce consequences if children don't cooperate. Every parent determines what expectations and consequences are appropriate for each child. Base them on children's age, development, and previous experience. Though it's hard, respond to temper tantrums with patience. Your confident, clear, and firm guidance will help children manage their emotions better. Logical consequences help keep children on track. I've known parents with preschoolers to require uncooperative dressers to leave for child care while still dressed in pajamas. Once at child care, the parent asks the provider to allow the child to privately finish dressing on his or her own. Such matter-of-fact consequences are rarely needed more than once.

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About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. She writes a weekly column for parents in her local newspaper. Karen is author of two books and frequent contributor to *Child Care Information Exchange*.

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