

Getting through the Day with a Toddler: Daily Routines

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Benefits of Routines

Establishing a daily schedule with predictable routines can make life with a toddler more manageable. Children feel confident and are more independent and competent when they know where things are, how things work, what to expect, and what steps need to be done in what order to accomplish what they need to accomplish. They are less likely to battle things (like cleaning up toys or brushing teeth) when they know they are just something that has to happen every day. They are less likely to melt down when they are well-rested and fed on a regular basis. Toddlers feel safe and secure when life is predictable, and the more secure they feel, the more energy they can focus on playing, exploring, and learning. And for tired parents, routines mean that we don't have to continuously make decisions and to *think* as much about what to do next – we know!

Building a Daily Schedule

Start with mealtimes, naptime, and bedtime. Spend a week or two keeping a journal of what you are currently doing, and see what the patterns are. What's working well? What's not? Then write down what your ideal schedule would be. Make a plan for how to move in that direction. (For example, if your child stays up till 9:00 or 9:15 every night, you can't just declare one day that they must go to sleep at 7:30. But, you could do bedtime at 9:00 one night, 8:50 the next, 8:40 the next, and so on.)

Then fill in the rest of the schedule: together time, solo play time for your child, etc. Include lots of physical activity for them – at least an hour a day, but more is better. Build in hygiene habits (hand-washing, tooth-brushing), and clean-up times. If there are chores that need doing, put those just before a favorite activity, so they always know that as soon as they finish clean-up they get to play.

Reinforce the routine by talking about "this is how we *always* do things." [Note: It helps if the weekend schedule is similar to weekday schedule.] Make visual schedules - posters with pictures.

Morning Routine

If you have a child that wakes up earlier than you want to be out of bed yourself, then make a basket of "quiet morning toys" for your room, and set limits on how/what they can play early in the morning, and how they know when it's OK to transition to louder morning activities.

If you have a child that's happy to sleep in and slow to wake up, go ahead and spend time taking care of yourself, and getting yourself ready for the day first. Then put on some cheerful morning music, start with morning hugs and kisses, and read a few stories together to start them on their day.

Morning routine might include getting dressed, breakfast, brushing teeth, feeding dog... try to do the same activities in the same order, each morning. You could make a small flip book showing the steps in the morning routine. Hang it on their doorknob. They can walk themselves through it each day.

Along the way, you can offer choices, but only offer simple options that you can live with, and keep the number of options small. A good rule of thumb is to take their age plus one: so, a two year old would be offered three choices: red shirt or blue shirt or Bluey shirt?

Getting out the Door

If in the morning, you're always stressed and yelling "hurry up", do some work the night before to lay clothes out, prep some food, and so on. Also, whenever you return home from an outing, re-pack your diaper bag or whatever else you know you'll be taking with you next time you leave so it's ready.

Set an alarm on your phone for ten minutes before you have to leave. When it goes off, remind your child of the steps they need to do to be ready on time. Tell them they can have a few more minutes of playtime, then you'll start the leaving-the-house countdown. While they have their playtime, you get all *your* things ready to go so you can give them your full focus in those last few minutes. Two minutes before time to go, do the final steps of shoes, coats, picking up your bags and heading out.

Naptime

A "typical" one-year-old needs 10 – 13 hours of sleep at night, and one or two naps (a total of 2 hours of nap.) A two-year-old may need 9.5 – 12 hours a night, and one nap (1.5 – 2.5 hours). Three's may give up napping, but (with work) you can create an afternoon "quiet time by yourself."

To settle your child down, try an abbreviated version of the bedtime routine. If they fall asleep at naptime, let them sleep till they wake up. Don't feel like you have to wake a child to be sure they'll sleep at night – good naptime sleep begets good night-time sleep. If your child won't sleep, you can still enforce a quiet time. Be very matter of fact that they must stay in their room for a certain amount of time, and can only get up when you say it's OK. If you are consistent every day, they're less likely to fight it. If they learn *sometimes* you let them get up, they'll fight for that every day.

Dinner Time

If dinner prep time is hard every day, then plan for it! Have an activities basket that only comes out at that time (keeps it special). Involve your child in meal prep. Give yourself plenty of time to get things done with toddler distractions. Planning out meals in advance can make this time less stressful.

Bedtime Routine

Start your bedtime routine before the first yawn. Lots of kids will go from tired-but-not-yawning to yawning to overtired-wild-child if you wait too long. Start winding down about a half hour before bedtime: dim the lights, turn the temperature down in the house so they want to get under their snuggly blankets. Turn off all screens, for you and them. Consider a bedtime snack and/or a bath.

About ten minutes before bedtime, start final steps: pajamas and stories. Set clear limits on time and number of activities. Again, if kids learn *some* nights you'll read 5 stories, they'll ask for 5 every night!

Think about having multiple sleep "cues" that help cue your child to settle down but don't let them become sleep "crutches" without which they can't sleep. For example, your child might usually have: bedtime music, bedtime story, pajamas, and teddy bear. But not always all of them... that way if one night you can't find the stuffed animal they can still sleep. Practice nights without one of those items.

Adjust as Needed

Every time you change a routine, expect a transition period of ~10-14 days before it's fully working. And expect it to be a bit of a battle. It helps if you can make changes to routine gradually, and if you know a big change is coming, you can talk about it beforehand.