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**South Brunswick Public Schools  
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# **25** Ways You Can Put **The Power of Routines** To Work for You and Your Child

One of a series of Parent Guides from



## **Parent Guide**

### 25 Ways You Can Put **The Power of Routines** To Work for You and Your Child

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## Introduction

It's no mystery: Children thrive on structure. Even the most free-spirited, independent kids do best when they're given clear limits and understand what's expected of them. This is where routines come in.

Routines—dependable, straightforward ways of handling day-to-day family life—are wonderful for keeping your home manageable and peaceful (at least as peaceful as a house full of children can be). Rather than being overly-regimented—kids aren't soldiers, after all—routines allow you, as a parent, to offer your youngsters loving, predictable consistency. Better yet, routines can help you cut down on nagging and power struggles.

Of course, implementing routines takes awhile. Research has shown that it takes 21 repetitions for a new routine to become a habit—that's a lot of reminders to "Pick up your backpack!" Still, if you're committed to the idea of a more structured home, you can learn to put the power of routines to work for you.

What follows are 25 areas in which you can implement, strengthen or modify various routines. You may not need to try all the ideas in this Parent Guide, but try establishing some suggested routines in areas that are chaotic for your family. First, though, are solutions to some of the most common "routine roadblocks."

*\*Each child is unique, so this publication alternates using masculine and feminine pronouns.*

## Routine Roadblocks

**Q:** My children are far apart in age. How can I find a routine that's appropriate for a 10-year-old and a four-year-old?

**A:** Be flexible. Any routine you implement—such as a nighttime routine—can be modified for different ages. For instance, your 10-year-old's nightly routine might include turning off the TV 30 minutes before lights-out and unwinding to music. Your preschooler's routine, though, could mean 15 minutes of reading with you before bed.

**Q:** I have three kids, and my house is chaos! I've never really used routines, so I don't know where to start. What should I do?

**A:** Two words: baby steps. If you suddenly announce to your children that you'll be starting a dozen new routines TODAY, they'll mutiny. Instead, look at the areas of your family life that most need order. Is mealtime a nightmare? Check out "Dinnertime Routines." Come Saturday, is your place the monkey house at the zoo? Initiate a few "Weekend Routines." Start slowly, and the benefits will add up quickly.

**Q:** My spouse doesn't agree that routines are important. How can I get him to cooperate when it comes to establishing them?

**A:** Explain to him all the reasons why routines matter (see Introduction). If he still doesn't see the value of routines, ask that he at least not undermine your attempts to implement them. If you're consistent (and he's neutral), your children will still benefit.

## 1

**Morning Routines**

- Stagger wake-up times: If your middle-schooler needs more bathroom time than his younger sister, get him up 15-20 minutes before her.
- Have everyone pitch in during breakfast. Older children can pour cereal for their younger siblings. Afterward, the little ones can clear the bowls.
- Do your kids dawdle at the table? Set a kitchen timer for 10 minutes. When it buzzes, they'll know they need to get moving.

## 2

**Night-Before-School Routines**

- In the evening, have your kids help pack lunches, put backpacks by the door and lay out school clothes.
- After clearing the dinner dishes, set the table for breakfast.
- Make the kids responsible for giving you any permission slips, etc., that need to be signed. To make your point, institute a "no form-signing in the morning" policy.

## 3

**Mealtime Routines**

- Include kids in meal planning and preparation: Little ones can fold napkins or rinse carrots while older ones stir soup or pour drinks.
- Keep everyone seated until the meal is finished, then do the dishes together.
- Make family dinners a priority. Yes, your schedule is chaotic, but time spent at the table is too important to sacrifice. Set a regular dinnertime and write it in stone.

## 4

**Bedtime Routines**

- Establish a logical order of events—brush teeth, read a story, go to sleep—and follow it. This is especially valuable for young children.
- "Unplug" older kids—no TV, computer or videogames—half an hour before bed. Suggest they unwind by doing a puzzle, reading, or listening to soft music.
- Decide on a reasonable bedtime and be consistent about enforcing it.

## 5

**TV Routines**

- Decide how many hours each day the tube will be on, and don't waver from it. Experts recommend no more than 10 hours per week.
- Do your kids fight over the TV during the same couple of hours every day? Make those times "routine blackout periods" when no one watches anything.

## 6

**Mannerly Routines**

- A survey found that nine in 10 Americans believe common courtesy has broken down. Fight that figure! Get your family in the habit of saying "Please" and "Thank you" often.
- Practice passing food, using napkins, and other table manners at the dinner table.
- Do your kids save their nervous breakdowns for the moment the phone rings? If they absolutely must tell you something non-life-threatening right now, have them write it down and slip it to you.

## 7

**Chore Routines**

- Find age-appropriate tasks for your child to perform each week, and then let him. As tempting as it might be, don't do his chores for him.
- Post a colorful chore chart where everyone can see it and have your kids use stickers or markers to cross off their completed tasks.
- Set a regular time for completing chores. If chores are done at the same time each day, you won't have to keep track and nag so much.

## 8

**After School Routines**

- Designate a "stuff spot"—such as a closet or milk crate—near the front door where kids can drop their coats and backpacks when they come home.
- Use the "five minute rule": For the first five minutes after school, don't nag your kids about putting their things away. After that time, however, all bets are off.
- Let your kids unwind (with a snack, some playtime, or by chatting with you) for a little while before making them hit the books.

## 9

**Homework Routines**

- Find a comfortable homework spot and have your child use it daily. Desks and kitchen tables are ideal, but if he performs best sprawled on his bedroom floor, let him.
- Keep homework time quiet. Ban radios, TV and headphones while your child is working.
- Put your child in charge of his own work. Give him a notebook or calendar where he can keep track of assignments, and show him how to get organized.

## 10

**Bath Routines**

- Build some playtime into your little one's bathing routine. When you're finished with the soap and shampoo, give him a few minutes to splash around.
- Outline a list of tasks for older kids to complete after bathing/showering: rinse tub, hang up towel, put dirty clothes in the hamper.
- Stick to your child's evening bath routine—don't let your child postpone it for "just a few more minutes." It will interfere with bedtime.

## 11

**Discipline Routines**

- Decide what your household rules will be—no cursing, no hitting, etc.—and make sure your children know and understand them and their consequences.
- Be consistent. If jumping on the couch is NOT okay today, it should not be okay tomorrow, either.
- Starting a new discipline strategy? Stick with it for at least two months. Give up sooner and your kids will learn that if they pester you long enough, you'll abandon whatever approach you're trying.

## 12

**Reading Routines**

- Create a reader-friendly home: Keep books, magazines and newspapers where little hands can reach them.
- Have a family reading night. Once a month, turn off the TV and share a stack of books together. Make sure the kids get to read aloud to Mom and Dad, too!
- Read for pleasure yourself. If your kids often see you with your nose in a book, they'll figure out that reading is fun.



## 13

**Weekend Routines**

- Don't abandon all your weekday routines simply because it's Saturday. Bedtime, bath time and dinnertime, especially, should be adhered to as much as possible.
- Encourage your kids to wake up at their usual time. No need to rustle them out of bed at the crack of dawn, but maintaining a nearly normal rise-and-shine schedule will make Monday morning easier.
- Starting a new routine? Avoid the workweek frenzy and launch it now.

## 14

**Safety Routines**

- Regularly talk to your kids about guns, but keep it simple: "If you see a gun, don't touch it. Run and tell an adult."
- Remind your children regularly about stranger safety, including what to do if a stranger comes to the door. Also, make sure they know their own address and phone number, and how (and when) to dial 911.
- Practice fire drills once or twice yearly. Show kids how to escape during a fire, and where you'll meet once outside.
- Teach your child about car safety. To avoid hurting little hands, say "Hands on your knees" before shutting car doors. And always check to see that seat belts are fastened before turning on the car.

## 15

**Holiday Routines**

- Charity begins at home, so make your home charitable! Do something—like donating money or serving meals at a shelter—that benefits others.
- Stay family-centered. For every large-scale celebration you attend, do something more personal (like baking cookies) at home.
- Maintain traditions. Your 12-year-old might rant about attending that "dumb family picnic" every Labor Day, but as an adult he'll likely recall it fondly.

## 16

**Summertime Routines**

- The learning doesn't stop just because school's out. Make regular trips to the library during the hot, sticky months, and consider signing your kids up for summer reading programs.
- Reassess homework routines from the past school year. If something didn't work well, brainstorm ways to modify it for the fall.
- Summertime isn't slacker time, so keep your kids on track. School routines may not apply right now, but the rest—from chores to discipline—certainly do.



## 17

**Restaurant Routines**

- Dining out is a privilege, not a right. Before arriving at a restaurant, remind your kids about proper etiquette.
- Consider a “three strikes” rule. If your kids act up once or twice, give them warnings. Three times? Pay the check and leave. Poor behavior shouldn’t be tolerated—and other diners’ meals shouldn’t be ruined.
- Bring coloring books, toys and crackers to occupy little ones. But be realistic: If you have a toddler, your “big night out” may need to involve a drive-thru.

## 18

**Boredom-Busting Routines**

- Fill a “boredom box” with crayons, construction paper and scissors. Break it out when boredom strikes.
- Write several once-in-a-while tasks—e.g., reorganize the silverware drawer, straighten the hall closet—on pieces of paper, and put them in a jar. The next time your child is too bored for words, pluck one out. Voilà! Something to do!
- Don’t cave to every whimper of “I’m bored!” There’s nothing wrong with a little boredom, and not every moment needs to be filled.

## 19

**Sibling Rivalry Routines**

- “He hit me!” “No, she hit me!” Kids can’t get their stories straight? Sit them on the couch and refuse to listen until they agree on a single version of events.
- Fighting again? Give them a relatively big task to perform (such as weeding the garden), and don’t let either one leave until the job is done.
- Do the biggest battles center on the TV or computer? Take both away for a solid week. Your kids may begin to rethink the wisdom of war.

## 20

**Playdate Routines**

- Before they have friends over, remind your kids that the rules of the house apply to guests, too.
- Avoid being put on the spot. Explain to your child that any special requests (e.g., “Can Emily stay for dinner?”) must be made privately between the two of you.
- Be flexible: Let your kids have some wiggle room when their friends are over. After all, extra cookies and juice make playdates more fun!

## 21

**Sleep Routines**

- Set limits. Your kids need to know that more than one cry of “I’m thirsty” or “I need my other favorite blanket” will go unanswered.
- Is your preschooler an extremely early riser? Put a digital clock in his room and tell him he must stay in bed (or at least his room) until the first number says “6.”
- Be kind. Even the most rigorous sleep routines are subject to change in the face of thunderstorms, tummy aches and bad dreams.

## 22

**Separation Routines**

- Follow a 1-2-3 rule for preschool drop-offs: Help your child put away his jacket, enjoy a quick cuddle together, then wave goodbye and go.
- Resist the urge to linger in your child’s classroom for more than a few moments. It will only make the separation harder.
- Pick a silly catch-phrase to use only on school or daycare days. “See you later, alligator!” will make your child laugh and will remind her that short separations are no big deal.

## 23

**School Routines**

- Honor school time. Avoid scheduling appointments, vacations or other interruptions during regular school hours.
- Talk often about the importance of education. Remind your kids that, first and foremost, their “job” is to work hard and do their best in school.
- Stay in touch with your child’s teacher. Don’t wait for conferences to find out what’s happening in the classroom. Use semi-regular notes or e-mails to keep the lines of communication between school and home wide open.

## 24

**Quiet Time Routines**

- Toddler no longer napping? Designate one hour of quiet time each afternoon. He doesn’t need to sleep, but he does need to play quietly in his room.
- Encourage calm activities. Keep interesting board games and puzzles around, and use them as a family.
- Parents need breaks, too, so build some quiet time into your own day. Napping, stretching out with a book, or even taking a few deep breaths are all low-key ways to recharge.

## 25

**Special (and Loving) Routines**

- Say “I love you” to your child every day. It will let her know that even when you’re angry or tired, you still adore her.
- Spend relaxed, one-on-one time with your child often. It may be as simple as a walk around the block together after dinner, but it will be priceless to her.
- Whether it’s a secret handshake each night or an Olympics-like chess match every Sunday, create a distinctive routine all your own.

**Routine Reality Check**

**Are some of your tried-and-true routines beginning to falter?** They may need updating. As your kids grow and change, your routines should change with them. For example, an 8 p.m. bedtime was fine when your child was six, but now that he’s nine, it’s time to reevaluate.

**Are your routines spinning out of control?** Then refocus. For instance, if your child’s nighttime routine has subtly morphed from “Read me two stories” into “Read me five,” put your foot down. Remind him of the original plan and recommit to it. Be sure to tell him early in the day that you’ll be going back to two books tonight.

**Would you like to make certain routines more effective but don’t know how?** Ask your kids for input. As a family, discuss which practices need bolstering and have the kids suggest ways to make them better or more fair. They may surprise you with their creative ideas.

**Do your kids feel hemmed in by all these routines?** Give them more responsibility. For example, if all they do on school nights is set out their backpacks, have them make their own lunches, too. If they have more ownership in the process, they may take more pride in—and complain less about—what they’re doing.

**For more information****Family Circle**

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[www.ed.gov/pubs/parents/Homework/part5.html](http://www.ed.gov/pubs/parents/Homework/part5.html)

**“Raising Polite Children in Impolite Times”**

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**“Parenting: Routines That Work”**

by Anne Cassidy

Presidio, Inc.

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Child Care Aware

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[www.ourspecialkids.org/tgi-routines.html](http://www.ourspecialkids.org/tgi-routines.html)

**“Trouble at the Preschool Door”**

by Caroline Fish,

FamilyEducation.com

[http://familyeducation.com/article/](http://familyeducation.com/article/0,1120,63-614,00.html)

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**“The Importance of Routines”**

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