

21st November 2015

Routine and Boundaries

Why do kids need routines and structure especially in a divorce?

Many parents who are getting divorced complain that it is difficult to keep routines and boundaries with children, the one parent implements routines and then when the children go to the other parents, these routines and boundaries fly out the window!

The question in divorced families and even family that are not divorced is why do we need routines and boundaries for children...because routines give them a sense of security and help them develop self-discipline. Humans are afraid of many things, but "the unknown" edges out everything except death and public speaking for most people.

Children's fear of the unknown includes everything from a suspicious new vegetable to a major change in their life.

Unfortunately, children are confronted with change daily.

The very definition of growing up is that their own bodies change on them constantly.

Babies and toddlers give up pacifiers, bottles, breasts, cribs, their standing as the baby of the house. New teachers and classmates come and go every year. They tackle and learn new skills and information at an astonishing pace, from reading and crossing the street to soccer and riding a bike. Few children live in the same house during their entire childhood; most move several times, often to new cities and certainly to new neighborhoods and schools. And few of these changes are within the child's control.

Children, like the rest of us, handle change best if it is expected and occurs in the context of a familiar routine.

A predictable routine allows children to feel safe, and to develop a sense of mastery in handling their lives. As this sense of mastery is strengthened, they can tackle larger changes: walking to school by themselves, paying for a purchase at the store, going to sleepaway camp.



Unpredictable changes – Mom called away on an unexpected business trip, a best friend moving, or more drastic, parents divorcing or a grandparent dying – erode this sense of safety and mastery and leave the child feeling anxious and less able to cope with the vicissitudes of life.

While helping children feel safe and ready to take on new challenges and developmental tasks would be reason enough to offer them structure, it has another important developmental role as well.

Structure and routines teach kids how to constructively control themselves and their environments.

Kids who come from chaotic homes where belongings aren't put away never learn that life can run more smoothly if things are organized a little. In homes where there is no set time or space to do homework, kids never learn how to sit themselves down to accomplish an unpleasant task. Kids who don't develop basic self-care routines, from grooming to food, may find it hard to take care of themselves as young adults. Structure allows us to internalize constructive habits.



Won't too much structure dull our sense of spontaneity and creativity?

Sure, if it's imposed without sensitivity. There are times when rules are made to be broken, like staying up late to see an eclipse, or leaving the dinner dishes in the sink to play charades. But even the most creative artists start by mastering the conventions of the past, and find the pinnacle of their expression in working within the confines of specific rules.

There's no reason structure has to be oppressive. Think of it as your friend, offering the little routines and traditions that make life both easier and cozier. Not only will your kids will soak up the security, they'll internalize the ability to structure their own lives.

Remember child in a divorced family will settle easier into having 2 homes if they know that each home offers them the same routines, same boundaries and same safety. The difficulty having to adjust to different homes will be minimised if the transition is smooth: what is expected of the child is familiar in each home; the boundaries are familiar; routines are familiar; discipline and rewards are familiar.

Does this mean infants should be put on routines as early as possible?

NO! Infants tell us what they need. We feed them when they're hungry, change them when they're wet. Over time, they learn the first step of a routine: We sleep at night. But forcing an infant to accommodate to our routine is not responsive parenting. As your infant moves into babyhood, she will establish her own routine, settling into a schedule of sorts. Most babies settle into a fairly predictable pattern. We can help them with this by structuring our day around their needs, so, for instance, we make sure conditions are appropriate for her nap at the time she usually sleeps. Gradually, over time, we can respond to her natural schedule of eating and sleeping by developing a routine that works for her and for the whole family.

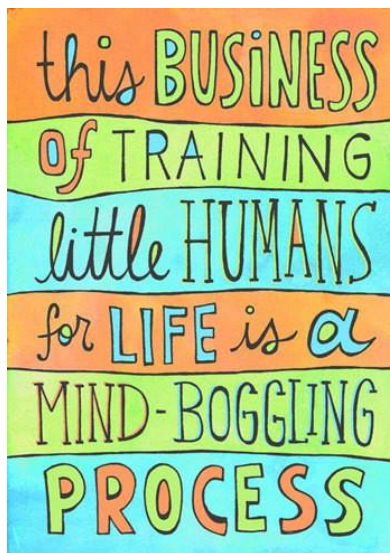


- 3. Routines help kids learn to take charge of their own activities.** Over time, kids learn to brush their teeth, pack their backpacks, etc., without constant reminders. Kids love being in charge of themselves. This feeling increases their sense of mastery and competence. Kids who feel more independent and in charge of themselves have less need to rebel and be oppositional.
- 4. Kids learn the concept of "looking forward"** to things they enjoy, which is an important part of making a happy accommodation with the demands of a schedule. He may want to go to the playground now, but he can learn that we always go to the playground in the afternoon, and he can look forward to it then.
- 5. Regular routines help kids get on a schedule,** so that they fall asleep more easily at night.
- 6. Schedules help parents maintain consistency in expectations.** If everything is a fight, parents end up settling: more TV, skip brushing teeth for tonight, etc. With a routine, parents are more likely to stick to healthy expectations for everyone in the family, because that's just the way we do things in our household. The result: a family with healthy habits, where everything runs more smoothly!



7. Start to **build the routine** around the times people wake, eat and sleep.
8. **Be realistic** and allow enough 'dither time' for your children to wash and dress, add in extras to the routine which you know your family needs; chore time, one-to-one time if you have more than one child, homework time and any out of school clubs or classes for older children.
9. **Pay close attention to night time:** if bags are packed, sports stuff is ready, school clothes are laid out and water bottles filled there'll be less to do in the morning. School age children can help with all of these things. You could even set up a specific Bedtime Routine.
10. If you can, remember to **rotate duties** with your partner, especially the bedtime routine as this will increase your child's trust in both Mum and Dad.
11. Get as much input as you can from your family and talk it through with other carers. A routine which works for everyone will be much easier to stick to.
12. If there's one activity, like toothbrushing, which is a nightly sticking point, set up a **Reward Chart** to deal with it, or add this chore to your child's existing chart.
13. When you first start the routine, talk your family through every step (even if you're tired of the sound of your own voice). Within a few weeks, your child could be reminding you 'Seven o'clock, Mum, you should be reading me a story!'

Being civil in a divorce is often difficult and sometimes impossible however for the sake of your children sit down and discuss routines, boundaries, discipline and rewards before the children start the back and forward between mom and dad. The impact of disorganized homes will have a dramatic effect on the children and cause even more tension and upset between the parents.



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