

# Child and Adolescent Behavioral Health

C&A Cares Newsletter

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# Structure and Routine During Difficult Times

So much has changed in our daily lives over a short period of time. During this turbulent and uncertain time, when our sense of normalcy is disrupted, structure and routine are important. Before the shut downs and stay-at-home orders, school and work provided most of our lives with structure. We had some idea of what to expect from day-to-day. As we adapt to ever changing circumstances, we need to establish new structures and routines in order to give ourselves a sense of control, to alleviate some of the stress and to give our minds a much needed break.

Change can be difficult under the best of circumstances. Unexpected and unwanted changes are even more challenging. Lack of structure in our lives allows days to run together in an endless and chaotic stream. This can lead to depression, anxiety, feeling ineffective and a sense that everything is pointless. Structure grounds us by providing understanding of what's next and helps us to organize what we are doing from moment-to-moment. Routines anchor us by providing a degree of predictability in an otherwise unstable time.

Children are not only need structure and routine, they thrive on them. They flourish when they are provided with sameness, repetition and predictability. Think about how young children like watching the same movie over and over and over again. Why do they do that? To them the world is still very unfamiliar, unpredictable and confusing. They're learning new things every day. When they watch the same movie or TV show or read the same story again and again, the story becomes familiar. The same events happen in the same predictable order every time. It doesn't change. This experience is like an oasis of stability. It is a comforting mental break for the child's brain.

## Routines help children:

- Children feel competent and confident as they move through the familiar steps of a routine.
- Routines increase felt safety and security. When a child doesn't know what to expect, internal alarms go off and anxiety is triggered.
- Routines that include activities done together \*such as sharing a family meal or reading together before bed) strengthen relationships.
- Routines help in building healthy habits such as handwashing after using the bathroom before meals.
- Once established, routines allow children to need fewer instructions because each step of the routine prompts the next step.



## Routines vs. Spontaneous:

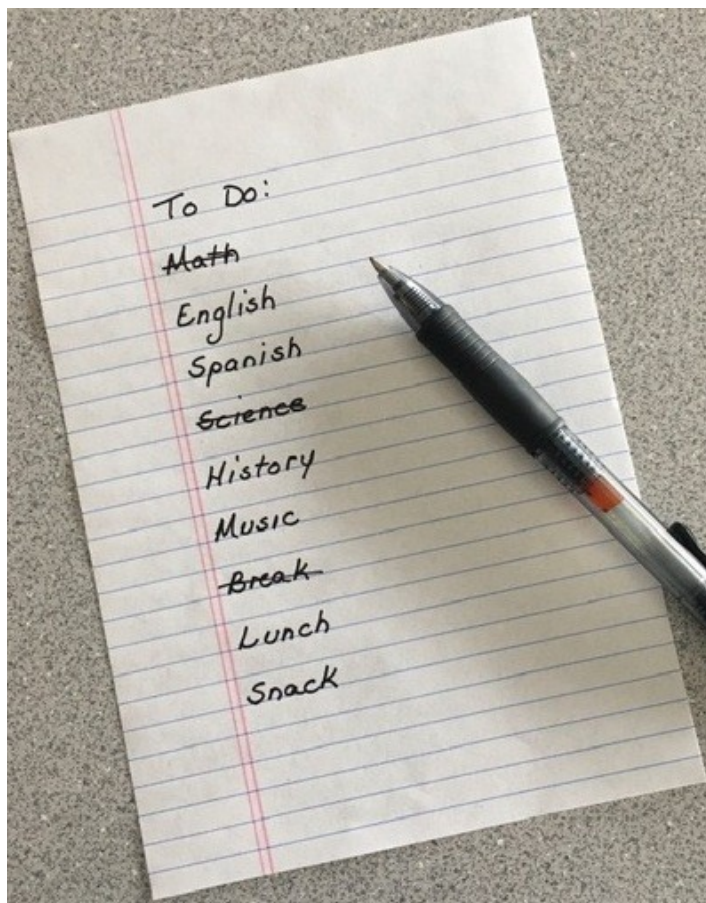
Some parents are reluctant to establish routines for the families because they are afraid that their lives will become tedious and stifling - they want spontaneity! The truth is that the best arrangement is a balance of both. Schedules that are too rigid can feel restricting and increase stress. On the other hand, if all decisions are made spontaneously, the result is chaos. Routines help structure parts of the day so that they can run smoothly and without much effort. This frees up a lot of time that your family can fill with spontaneity. Routines should be flexible enough to allow for unexpected events (like the WiFi crashing) and occasional variations (for special days like holidays). Having a routine doesn't mean you can't have fun.

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## Ways to structure routines:

- One way to set up routines is by scheduling events to happen at certain times of day. An example of this might be to set consistent times for waking up and going to bed.
- "First-then" is a different way to structure a routine. This style of routine specifies the order in which tasks should be done without assigning specific times to them. For example, a bedtime routine might start with a bath, then reading stories or listening to music and finally good-night hugs and kisses.
- Routines can be structured as a lists of tasks. For example, a child might have specific subjects of academic work that needs to be completed. For younger children, it might be helpful to write each of these subjects on a note card and moving the note cards from a "to do" stack or area to a "done" stack or area as each subject is completed. For older children, make a list so that each subject can be crossed off as it is completed. This type of structure allows a lot of freedom to choose the order in which tasks are done, it is helpful in keeping track of what needs to be done and it gives concrete evidence of what you've accomplished so far.



## How routines help parents:

- Cut down on chaos. Structure and routines help adults to be more organized, more in control and less stressed.
- Once established, children can follow routines without needing you to constantly give directions, which frees you up to do other things.
- Cut down on arguments. A well- established routing will lead to fewer arguments about what should be done and when it should be done.
- Consistently following a routine allows you to be able to predict how members of your family will respond, which allow you to plan for success and prevent blowups from occurring.
- Routines express your family's values. For example, baths, tooth-brushing and toileting are included in bedtime routines because your family believes that hygiene is important.
- Routines that include activities done together (such as sharing a family meal or reading together before bed) strengthen relationships.

## Using routines to Inspire hope

In a time when our minds are filled with thoughts of illness, infection, death, isolation, closings and losses, we all need glimmers of hope. Plan something to look forward to every day. It doesn't have to be something big. Small pleasures like watching a show you enjoy, spending time outside, connecting with a friend, listening to your favorite song or enjoying a favorite food in a meal or snack can give you a positive reason to get out of bed every morning. It reminds us that there are still some good things in life!




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**Our mailing address is:**

919 2nd St. N.E., Canton, Ohio 44704

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