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A Mom's Life: Establish routines to keep family on time

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My kids have always been early risers, and my husband likes to point out that he hasn't set his alarm clock since our oldest was born.

For us, getting out of the house on time for doctor appointments or lessons isn't much of a problem since we've usually been up for hours. But that's not the case for many busy families.

My friends who are lucky enough to have kids who sleep past daybreak say they have struggled to get everyone ready and out the door in time for school, play dates or other commitments. These are people who juggle multiple projects professionally and always meet their deadlines. However, when you add in potential for temper tantrums, lost permission slips or an overturned breakfast, you can throw off even the most organized of parents.

I spoke with Pam Woods, a certified professional organizer and the president and founder of Smart WorkLife Solutions, about how to keep families on time without rush or worry.

Her tips for getting started are simple and straight-forward, and the mother of three grown children says they're achievable for any family, no matter the age of your kids.

First, she recommends that your family create a routine. Think about everything your family must do to be ready for school, work or appointments in the morning. Set the structure for your routine based on those needs. Let your children know exactly what is expected of them, step-by-step, including tasks they can accomplish the night before to streamline your morning. Older kids can go by a chart or list, and Woods says you can create a picture book of instructions for kids as young as 2 years old.

"It creates a structure, it tells your child what they can expect next," she says. "When you practice it over a period of time, it becomes a habit, a no-brainer."

To set children up for success, parents need to train them exactly how to accomplish each step so that they're able to do the actions without frustration.

And, "it's key that the parent remembers to always and immediately reward the child for completing all the tasks," Woods adds.

To create a routine that really works, she says parents should time how long each action takes and cushion that with a few extra minutes for the unexpected.

"A lot of people are not good at estimating how long it takes to complete a task," she says. "I recommend that you make a game of it, and with your child estimate how long it is going to take, then actually time it."

Next, Woods recommends every family place a cubby near the door. You and your children should put everything you need for the following day in the bin so you're not searching for homework, backpacks, musical instruments, athletic clothes or other items during your morning rush. You should also consider having a family calendar that you update once a week, all together. That way there won't be any last-minute dashes for show-and-tell items or soccer jerseys.

Simplifying breakfast is another step Woods says can make the difference between a flustered start or a smooth beginning to your day. Her suggestion is to supply lots of healthy, easy-access options such as

yogurt, breads, cereal and fruits. Make sure children know exactly what's available and where it's located so they can independently fix their morning meal.

"As soon as possible wean your child from thinking that you are going to make breakfast, and make it a self-serve thing," she says.

Finally, she says families must be consistent and make no exceptions when it comes to their new routine. Older kids may have to miss out on a breakfast or two to learn you're serious, and younger ones might have to go a day without their favorite toy if they neglect to put it in the cubby.

"Life outside home is full of real consequences, if you don't do something by the deadline or the agreed-upon date, then stuff happens," Woods says. "It makes sense to me that the training and the experiences your child has be consistent with the way real life is going to treat them."

So, once your family creates the ideal routine, should you ease into it?

Woods says no.

"You set the stage by talking about the routine, creating the checklist, timing it and then the next day you give it a whirl," she says. "That doesn't mean it's going to be perfect Day 1, Day 2 or even Week 1, but you are going to get there."

If your family is currently lagging behind in the mornings, I wish you the best of luck getting where you need to be on time. And, please send good thoughts my way in having kiddos who sleep in late enough to require a well-crafted morning routine.
