

The Children's Program, P.C., retains the rights for reproduction of this document. Do not copy in whole or in part in any form. Additional copies are available by request from The Children's Program, P.C.

UP IN THE MORNING / READY FOR SCHOOL

by Jeffrey Sosne, Ph.D.

Establish a Routine. The most critical element is the development of a morning routine. A fairly rigid morning routine helps a youngster build the habits and enables them to eventually get ready in the morning more independently. Although a checklist may help in the beginning, ultimately it is the routine itself that should guide a child from one step to the next. In the initial stage, it is more important that the children stick to their routine than to get ready independently.

Step by Step. The morning routine can vary from child to child, but it must have specific steps that a family should try and follow. Eventually the order of the steps will help guide the child through their morning responsibilities.

First Things First. Many families develop a morning routine where the steps are out of order. A child begins their morning by watching TV instead of getting dressed or eating breakfast. As a result, responsibilities don't get done and the youngster resists getting ready for school. Although the best routine varies from child to child, it is usually best for children to get dressed before they leave their bedroom and to go from their bedroom directly to the breakfast table. From there, teeth-brushing and on to gathering school materials.

Clear Goals. The children do best when there are clear morning time goals. The youngsters we work with respond to time goals, where the objective is to meet each step of the morning routine in a certain amount of time. Some youngsters even enjoy a game of beating the timer and earning points for doing so. It should also be clear what the ultimate goal is; what does the child need to accomplish to get ready for school and what time do they need to be ready by.

Shorten the Morning Routine. Some parents have tried waking their children up earlier to have more time to get ready for school. Usually, this results in a sleepier child and a more drawn-out morning routine. Although there are exceptions, most ADHD and ADD children do better with a shorter timeline that they learn to meet more efficiently. This gives them more sleep and more time to have fun in the morning or after school.

Cut Out Steps. In the initial stages, the morning time routine should have the fewest steps possible. Making beds, feeding animals, cleaning rooms, making lunches, etc. should come later. Many children do better with a quick breakfast (e.g., instant breakfast, breakfast bar, breakfast meat, yogurt) that they can eat on their way to school or to the bus stop!

Stay Calm. Although few of us lead the life of the model TV family, getting angry over the morning routine rarely accomplishes anything.

Prepare the Night Before. One way to improve the morning routine is to prepare ahead of time. Some children do much better if they get their clothes and their book bag ready for school the night before. Some youngsters will even get part of their breakfast ready the night before. Perhaps one of the most creative, and perhaps extreme, examples is of children who actually get partially dressed the night before and sleep in their sweats or tee-shirts!

Parents Prepare Ahead. Although not always possible, it is best if parents can get their responsibilities out of the way so that they can be available to coach their children through the morning routine. If parents have things they must do, then it is hard for them to help their children or deal effectively with problem behavior.

Start With Coaching. Too often, the morning routine involves multiple reminders, warnings, threats, etc. from parents to their children. We expect the children to get ready for school, but we have never coached them how to do it. We talk about the steps, but talking about how to get ready in the morning is not enough. Spend a week or two with your child helping them through the steps, identifying plans for handling distractions or simplifying the process. As your child is more successful, then you can have them try getting ready more independently.

Help If You Must. Sometimes a child's behavior demands adult intervention and supervision. Even though you believe your child is capable of the morning task (e.g., tying shoes), don't be afraid to help. You will have the option of having them practice later that day (even if they don't want to) or charging them for time you spent giving help that they did not need.

Do It Together. For some children, particularly if they benefit from medication that they have not yet gotten that day, the morning routine can be very challenging. If this is the case, it is sometimes better to go through each stage with your child. Get dressed together, eat together, brush together, etc. It is a bit more time consuming, but often less stressful.

Stay Out of It. For other children, particularly when they are a bit older, you should stay out of the morning process. The pattern of reminding and threatening, and even rewarding, only compounds the problem. We have known families whose children get ready completely independently, with parents using the morning time to exercise, do chores, prepare for work, etc.

Arrange Consequences. Sometimes it is better to arrange a consequence for being late to school than it is to impose a logical consequence. Talk to the principal or teacher about what they can do to emphasize the importance of being to school on time. Some schools will ask a child to stay after school to make up the time or will arrange a fun activity for first thing in the morning (when a phone call from home informs them that the child will be late).

Make a Positive Connection. Children who get ready for school independently are saving their parents' time and helping to improve the family mood. In return, parents should have time to take their children fun places or to do fun things. Parents should be more willing to arrange special privileges (e.g., staying up a bit later to watch a special TV show) and opportunities (e.g., having a sleep over with some friends). A particularly smooth morning might leave time to go out for breakfast or watch some TV. If parents think about the amount of time they are spending on their child's morning routine now, and add up the time saved when their youngster becomes

more responsible, the time savings should be very clear. Some families actually chart and post the time saved towards a fun outing.

Beware of Some Rewards. In an effort to be positive, parents will sometimes reward morning time successes with video games or television or some other fun activity. When it is time to go to school, the children have trouble stopping what they are doing, and they get upset. It is sometimes better to earn the fun time and save it up for later.

Charge for the Time. At some point, parents should "charge" for the extra time they spend getting their children ready in the morning. Each reminder might cost a nickel, or each minute spent unnecessarily helping their child get ready for school might mean a minute or two of extra chores to help their parents later that day. This helps the child learn how their behavior affects other people and it teaches them responsibility.

Practice Later. The most logical and helpful consequence for not following the morning routine is to practice later. It is usually best to practice later that day, since parents usually have more time, and they are less pressured. Although the children may interpret having to practice as a punishment, going through the morning routine 2 or 3 times in the afternoon is a logical way to get better at it. Children can refuse to practice, but they may find that they are unable to convince their parents to give them a ride to a friend's house or discover that they are unable to watch television or go to soccer practice until they cooperate. If you have the option of practice, you can respond more gently to a child's noncompliance in the morning ("It's okay, I can help you get dressed this morning and we'll just practice this when you get home from school).

Late for Work? If parents are late for work because of their children's noncompliance or negativity in the morning, they may find it helpful to charge their children for their "lost wages." Children who don't have the money to make up for their lost income can "pawn" a possession until they earn the money to pay their mom or dad.

What's Going On? Some children are slow to get ready in the morning because of some underlying problem that is not being addressed. A youngster may be avoiding school because of peer issues or classroom frustrations that parents are unaware of. There might be a problem with morning day care. Some children are seeking parental attention any way they can get it.

Children Need Sleep. A child who is anxious or having trouble falling asleep at night, may not be receiving a good night's rest. As a result they are sleep deprived and have trouble getting going in the morning. Just because your child gets up early on Saturday morning does not mean they are not sleep deprived; sometimes the excitement of morning cartoons is enough to get them up and going, just like some adults will get up early in the morning to go fishing even though they are tired.

Realistic Perspective. Morning is often the most challenging time of the day for ADHD children. If our expectations are too high and we try and change behavior too quickly, everyone gets frustrated. Remember, we have months and even years to accomplish these goals. Things will improve in time.