

Using the Power of Routines



What is a routine?

- A routine is an activity that is done with steps in the same order or way over and over.
- A routine is NOT a schedule. It is like a dance – the order of the steps is what is important, not the time of day.
- To make our lives easier, we have routines for things we do each day, like getting ready in the morning or preparing for bed. Sometimes we have routines without even realizing it.

Toddlers memorize routines in their lives.

- Your toddler works hard to learn everything about the world around him. He watches people and memorizes how and when things happen.
- Your toddler makes “scripts” in his mind based on the routines he remembers. His scripts are like movie scripts with one scene following the next. He uses these scripts to predict what will happen next. Knowing what to expect helps him feel safe and secure.
- When things don’t happen the way he expects, he may get frustrated or upset. He’s not trying to be difficult; it’s just how his brain works.



You are in charge of the scripts your toddler makes.

You can influence the scripts your toddler creates by introducing routines for him to memorize. Routines work for many daily activities, including getting ready in the morning, mealtimes, nap or bed time, getting in the car seat, and bath time. The routines don’t have to be complicated, they can include the tasks you do already. To make a routine:

1. Choose a few steps for your routine. Keep it simple!
2. Do the same steps in the same order over and over.
3. Allow time for your baby to memorize the new routine.



Creating and Changing Routines



Creating a new routine

You can use routines to help your toddler feel calm and happy. For example, many toddlers cry when getting put into their car seats. If you notice your toddler getting upset when put into his car seat, you could start using a simple routine to help him with the transition of moving from the house or daycare to the car. It doesn't have to be complicated; it just needs to be consistent. He won't get as upset when he knows what to expect. Here are some simple steps you could include in your car seat routine:

1. Help your toddler get his jacket and diaper bag
2. Turn off the lights in the house
3. Walk to the car together while singing a specific song
4. Put the toddler in the car seat

As he goes through these same steps over and over, he'll create a script, learning that the steps end with him going into his car seat. Knowing what to expect may be all he needs to be calm and happy when getting into the car!



Changing an existing routine

You can change existing routines that aren't working for you anymore. When you need to change an existing routine, the key is to start with a completely new step. Starting in a completely new way will keep the original script from popping into your toddler's mind. A good example of when to change a routine is when weaning your toddler from the bottle. When he sees you start the process of making the bottle, he expects that he'll get the bottle at the end of the routine. Think about the steps you take when making your toddler a bottle. Change the first step completely and then change the rest of the routine ending with giving him a cup instead of a bottle. Here are some ways you can change this routine:

1. Store the cups in a different location than the bottles
2. Get the milk out first instead of getting the cup first
3. Pour the milk into the cup in a different location in the kitchen
4. Change the location where he drinks from his cup, like moving the location of his high chair or asking him to sit in a different chair at the table

After he gets used to the new routine, he'll no longer expect the bottle and will be more likely to take the cup without getting upset.



You know your baby best, so you can develop routines that work best for you both!