

Back-to-school Basics

Hundreds of thousands of school children are making the transition from lazy summer days back to the rigid structure of the school year. Alarm clocks and alarmed parents are making the early morning call, expecting children to rise and shine with a smile. When they don't, school mornings become battles. Yelling, nagging, blaming, and rushing fill the short time before children and parents leave for school and work feeling stressed, guilty, resentful, or exhausted—already. Can there be a peaceful start to the day?

Some children are up, ready for school bright and busy-tailed morning after morning. I had one of those. Others are like stale taffy to get out of bed much less out the door. I had one of those, too. What most parents neglect to consider is that their children have agendas of their own on school mornings. Some have temperaments that require slow-motion to get going. Some are more anxious wondering what the expectations of them will be, who their friends will be, what their teacher will say, what they will have to do to measure up. These are not conscious thoughts; more like nagging, low-key anxieties that disrupt a child's focus on what has to get done to get out the door on time. These anxieties are often misread by parents as stubborn, lazy, or inconsiderate behavior. Anxiety may keep children resistant to bedtime or lying awake worrying about the day before or the day ahead. And some simply need time to adjust their body clocks for optimal functioning.

Children's agendas often clash with a parent's anxious to have their day done at night and to get their children up, fed, dressed, and out the door on time in the morning—without an argument. When children resist the push from parents to be in bed or out the door, the battles begin. Children learn to anticipate the battlefield and enter the skirmishes with defiance already in place. No one wins. Nagging, yelling, blaming, and name-calling can send the best of parents to bed in guilt and out the door in despair.

Rarely does a parent stop and think, *Wait a minute, she's not being a problem, she's having a problem. How can I help so that mornings go smoother.* My daughter and I were in power struggles every night and morning until I got it. She was out to get me, being her grumpy, ornery self on purpose as far as I was concerned. What it took me quite awhile

to realize was that she wasn't doing anything *to me*. She was miserable about separating, going to sleep, getting up, leaving home, and saying goodbye day after day. Her temperament made it difficult for her to transition easily. As soon as I took this all into consideration, my perception switched 180 degrees and the way I spoke to her changed from anger to compassion. We never had another power struggle.

Setting school night routines: (Plan in the afternoon)

- Design your body clocks. Talk about or draw each of your “clocks” (easiest times for you each to wake and go to sleep). Discuss the differences. There are morning doves and night owls. Are there other types in your family?
- Discuss how much sleep each of you needs to be at your best.
- Make a bedtime routine chart, including times. Ask what each favorite routine is. Create one to work for all. Use pictures for pre-readers.
- Do everything you can at night: make lunches, lay out clothes, go over homework or school papers, organize backpacks, set out anything extra (instruments, hockey shoes), showers or baths. Create a checklist to be done each night or write a contract.
- If dressing causes consistent morning battles, consider allowing your child to sleep in clean school clothes.
- Discuss options that can be done in bed after goodnights are said—books, music, etc.

Nighttime routines are closely tied with morning routines. All must work as one piece.

De-stressing school mornings:

- Meet in the afternoon or evening to discuss morning problems. Acknowledge everyone's difficulties, i.e., they hate you nagging and rushing; you hate feeling pressured and being late.
- Ask each child what would make the morning routine easier.
- Discuss logistic problems, i.e. sharing bathroom, etc.
- Create a morning routine chart with everyone's input and agreement. Post.
- If you have a white board, write agenda items with a box next to it for your child to check off when done.
- Get up earlier and get your personal routine done before waking the children.
- Ease your child awake with a smile and a back rub—unless she uses an alarm clock.
- Never use labels like lazy, pokey, etc.

- If you're creative, prepare a "fancy" breakfast menu for your children to entice getting up. Not with choices but the menu of the morning. This can be a once in awhile option.
- Pay attention to your children's agendas. Wonder what they might be thinking, going through, anticipating. Be considerate of what your child might be dealing with—from a slow temperament to school concerns to sugary foods that might need earlier digesting. If things are not going smoothly, even silently acknowledge everyone's agendas.
- If your child is cranky, validate how hard some mornings are to get going and that you often have the same problem. Each day is different.
- Offer choices rather than telling your child what to do.
- Seriously consider no television on school nights or mornings.