

Emerging Minds Families

FACT SHEET

Routines: Creating family routines to support children's mental health

Emerging Minds acknowledges that families come in many forms. For the purposes of easy reading, the term 'parent' encompasses the biological, adoptive, foster and kinship carers of a child, as well as individuals who have chosen to take up primary or shared responsibility in raising that child.

We also appreciate that every child is unique and has different strengths, vulnerabilities and experiences that shape their health and development.

Routines are the way we generally do things in a day or a week – like leaving for school at the same time each weekday, going to swimming lessons on Thursday afternoons, or reading two stories together every night before bed. Some families call them rituals or rhythms.

Family routines support children's mental health but they're also good for everyone's wellbeing. They help each member of the family to get things done, reduce stress levels, and find time to connect and have fun together.

Routines and predictability help children feel safe, secure and connected.



Young children especially cope best when they know the order and way in which you do daily activities such as dinner, bath time, stories and bedtime.

When children are older, including them in planning daily or weekly routines and creating family rituals increases their 'buy in' and builds family connections.

If you're introducing new routines with older children, you might get some resistance. This is normal and doesn't mean you should give up. Keep trying and remind your child why having routines helps everyone in the family.

In this video (2 minutes, 41 seconds) parents and practitioners talk about the importance and benefits of family routines and rituals.

Stick to routines as much as possible – but be flexible

There might be times when you need to change or simplify a routine – for example, if you all got home late it might be a quick wash for your toddler instead of a bath; or on nights your child has sports training they might eat dinner in the car on the way home. Children cope better with changes to routines if you can tell them in advance (which we know is not always possible) and explain what will be different.

As much as you can, try to keep the order or ‘rhythm’ of your child’s days as predictable as possible. For example, even if their bedtime is later, you’ll still read one book or chapter together before bed to help your child wind down.

You might ask people in your support network for help. Is there a family member or friend who can come over and read with your older child so you can bathe your baby, or take your children to sports training when you’re not able to?

Also remember that it’s normal to skip, forget or have to change routines sometimes – and don’t feel bad or give up on them when you do. Routines don’t have to be perfect or set in stone. Keep them flexible and do what works for your family.

What if creating or maintaining family routines feels impossible?

Keeping routines as consistent as possible, especially when things are tough, is one way parents and other adults can help a child feel a sense of safety and predictability, which supports them to cope.

But it’s also important not to feel guilty if it feels impossible to set up or stick to family routines right now.

When you’re under stress, unwell or dealing with unavoidable changes like moving house, it can be extra difficult to create or stick to routines. Sudden or external events like a disaster or the death of a family member can also upset family relationships, routines and dynamics and take a toll on your own mental health and wellbeing.

If you can, try introducing just one routine at a time. A good way to start is always ‘re-connecting’ with your child after you’ve been apart. It might be a hug when they wake up, a snack and chat about your days after school or work, or a cuddle on the couch when they get home from a friend’s house or sports practice. Those routine moments help your child feel safe, secure and connected to you.

It’s also important to know that children can cope with different routines in different places. For example, when parents separate it’s common for there to be different rules and routines in different houses. Focus on what you can control – trying to keep routines predictable in your own home – and remind your child that ‘this is how we do it here’. Remember, children learn to manage different routines at their childcare/school, and other caregivers’ (e.g. grandparents’) houses, so with time they will adjust to the changes between your households.

When family circumstances change (e.g if money becomes tight) it can be hard to keep up your child’s routines. But children’s regular activities – and the friends they have there – are a valuable source of support, so it’s important to do what you can to maintain them.

Routines help children (and adults) to cope and feel more secure during difficult or stressful times. If you can maintain at least some of your family routines it can help you and your child connect and feel some sense of control and predictability. Uncertainty is one of the biggest causes of anxiety, so keeping up your routines is also a great way to support both your and your child’s mental health.



Routines can be fun

Routines help children feel secure because they know what to expect and when. But routines aren't just about scheduling your days or weeks. Things you do routinely on special occasions or at particular times can also be fun.

Family traditions or rituals – like movie night on Fridays, or always having ice cream cake when it's someone's birthday – are fun, and also important ways to build connections within your family.

Thinking about family routines

Take a moment to think about routines and rituals that your family currently has or might like to start.

- What activities do you and your child like doing together?
- What do you find is the best day/time to do things with them?
- What routines or family rituals do you already have?
- If something has upset your child's routines or meant they've had to stop an activity they enjoy, how has that affected them?
- Is there someone or something that could help keep up or re-establish your child's routines and activities?
- Are there any new routines or family traditions that you would like to try to introduce?



More information on family routines

Take a moment to think about routines and rituals that your family currently has or might like to start.

- If your family has experienced a disaster or traumatic event, watch our video about [re-establishing routines and rules](#) to support children's mental health, wellbeing and recovery.
- Read more about [how and why family routines work](#) on the Raising Children Network website.
- The Raising Children Network also has information about [routines and children with disability, autism or other additional needs](#).

This resource is one in a series of five ways you can support your child's mental health. Find out more about the other ways you can nurture and protect your child's mental health, now and into the future.

AVAILABLE HERE

Five ways to support your children's mental health



FOLLOW US