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# Organization Help for ADHD Children (and Their Parents!)

ADHD children often need organization help to stay on track. Learn to create reliable routines at home and at school — because good structure breeds great behavior in attention deficit kids.

by Peter Jaksa, Ph.D.

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All parents of ADHD children have heard the routine about routines: Kids need structure, and children with attention deficit need even more. The keys to getting the ADHD organization help you need: belief in the power of family routines and a long-term commitment to them.

You've heard it before: Set up a morning routine for ADHD children to get out the door on time. Make sure homework happens at the same time and in the same setting daily. Do something fun to unwind before a regular bedtime.

On paper, this seems pretty basic. But when you're raising a child with real attention difficulties in the real world, setting and maintaining such routines can seem downright hopeless. Yet there is hope — even happiness — in sight.

Many well-intentioned parents enthusiastically start out to establish the structure their children need. Yet many throw in the towel after a few weeks (or even a few days) because the routines are not working. "Billy just won't listen. He doesn't want to go along with it. Every day becomes a battle, and we're all worn out. Is there something else we can try?"

Usually, routines don't work because parents give up too soon. To make structure truly effective, routines need to be seen and implemented not just as simple behavioral strategies, but as a way of life.

## Multiple Benefits

Routines affect life positively on two levels. In terms of behavior, they help improve efficiency and daily functioning. It may not always be obvious, but children want and need routines. A predictable schedule offers structure that helps kids feel safe and secure. By building one, you send a message that says, "This is how we do things." Routines make daily activities manageable, allowing your child to focus on one thing at a time.

In addition, your whole family will benefit psychologically from a structured regime. Both parents and children experience decreased stress when there's less drama about what time you'll eat dinner and where you'll settle down to do homework.

What follows is a relaxed home, which yields stronger family relationships. And family identity is solidified by routines in which everyone plays a role (Anna sets the table, Brian clears the dishes). The message: We are a family who eats together; we are a family who reads together; we are a family who schedules regular times for schoolwork and other ongoing responsibilities.

In these hectic times, it may seem impossible to provide a structured lifestyle. Everyone is juggling schedules: work, school, recreation, music lessons, basketball practice, and so on. Yet in just such times, structure becomes most important. The payoff: greater productivity for your child, as well as better health and family relationships.

A review of 50 years of psychological research, recently published in *Journal of Family Psychology*, shows that even infants and preschoolers are healthier and exhibit better-regulated behavior when there are predictable routines in the family.

Effective routines take commitment and consistency, with all family adults presenting a united front. Routines should be established when children are young and applied consistently as they grow — but it's never too late to start. Above all, don't give up.

Here are suggestions and some sample routines to help get you started. Of course, you'll want to amend them to suit the age and maturity of your child, the specific behaviors you are working on, and your family's personality and needs. As you develop your routines, remember that success takes time — sometimes months and years. But the benefits will last a lifetime.

## Good Mornings

The goal of the morning routine is to get everyone ready and out the door on time. Preparations made the night before, such as bathing, packing bookbags, laying out clothes, setting the alarm, and making lunch, are crucial in setting up a smooth morning routine.

Because many children (and adults) with ADHD are highly distractible and impulsive, avoid stimuli that are likely to grab attention and throw the routine off course. For example:

1. Leave the TV off in the morning.
2. Don't get on the computer to check your e-mails.
3. Ignore that new magazine or catalog until after school or later that evening.

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## Routines, Part 2

### Homework Helper

It's often said that the only consistent thing about children with ADHD is their inconsistency. This is particularly problematic when it comes to academic effort. No activity demands greater structure and consistency than homework, when a child's ability to self-regulate is called upon. Not surprisingly, parent-child homework battles are common. But an established study routine (time, place, methods) goes a long way toward decreasing their frequency and intensity — if not eliminating them entirely. To establish a homework routine that will improve productivity and increase academic achievement:

- **Enforce a consistent start time.** This will help your child build a homework habit.
- **Stay close to your child.** Many children with ADHD concentrate better when an adult works with them or is nearby.
- **Take breaks.** Distractibility, restlessness, difficulty maintaining concentration, and low frustration tolerance — all typical of ADHD — almost guarantee mental fatigue and boredom. Frequent short breaks, during which the child is allowed to move around, can help.
- **Have fun afterward.** Your child is more likely to apply herself to homework when she knows that a fun activity, such as playing a game or watching TV, will follow.

### Dinner's Ready

For hundreds of years, family members have forged strong relationships around the dinner table. In this age of the Internet and TV movies on demand, a dinner ritual is still beneficial, if not crucial. While most mealtimes last only about 20 minutes (less time than a TV sitcom), a lot of good things can happen in that short time. Ideally,

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mealtimes should be a pleasant social time, with business, school, or family problems left off the table. It takes time and work to prepare a family meal, and it can be a hassle getting everyone together at one time, but you'll find the benefits are well worth the effort:

- Family members stay connected to one another's lives.
- Events are discussed and plans get made with everyone's input.
- Responsibility and family cohesion are encouraged by such simple acts as children setting the table and cleaning up afterwards.

## Good Nights

Your goal at bedtime is to help your child wind down and get to sleep at a usual time. Research shows that children with regular bedtime routines get to sleep sooner and awaken less often during the night than those without them. Many children with ADHD fight bedtime because, quite simply, going to bed is boring to them. It's time for sleep, but there's still so much they can do! Routines that offer rewards and pleasant activity while encouraging relaxation can help overcome the boredom of bedtime. Some things to try:

- **Have a light, healthy snack**, like an apple or cheese on a rice cake.
- **Play a quiet, low-stakes game, or read a book.**
- **Have a sweet and personal nightly lights-out ritual.**
- **Try to get your child into bed at the same time each evening.**

There's no question that establishing family routines takes a great deal of time and effort. You may ask yourself, "Can we afford the time and the energy to do all of this?" A better question might be, "Can we afford not to?"

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