

The Importance of Routines for Children with Visual Impairments¹

Routines are an important part of any child's life because they help children develop a sense of stability and order as well as give children the information and experiences necessary to complete tasks with increasing independence. They're especially important for children with visual impairments, who often have difficulty observing what's going on in the world around them. When things are predictable—when the same things happen in a certain order at a certain time of day—children are reassured that the world is a safe place in which they can learn to make their way. Routines can also give children who are visually impaired essential information about what causes lead to what effects, can help them develop patterns of behavior, can help them develop skills in sequence from beginning to middle to end, and can help develop confidence as whole processes.

Step-by-Step Sequences

As you probably know from your own experience, many daily activities are based on step-by-step routines. For example, there's your child's "getting up" routine, which involves taking off pajamas, putting on underwear, then socks, then play clothes, then shoes, followed by combing her hair. All these steps are part of a logical routine—a sequence of steps that fit together around a central theme.

The steps in a routine may be second nature to you but not to your preschooler until she's learned how to do each step in a systematic order. Doing the same series of steps each time you begin an activity—and telling your child what you're doing and why you're doing it—is one way to help her learn routines. Perhaps you begin each outing to the park by giving your little girl a hat to wear, and then putting on sunscreen, and then packing a small bag with extras like snacks and water. For a child who's visually impaired and can't learn by simply observing others, this kind of structure can provide the reassurance of knowing what's going to happen next. At the same time, repeating the steps can help build skills and self-confidence. For example:

- Your little girl gets to practice motor skills each time she zips the zipper on her jacket or ties her shoe laces.
- If she has some vision, she gets to practice using it to see where her favorite seesaw is.
- Your child gets to learn about concepts. Is the bag with snacks on the table or in the refrigerator? What comes first, second, and last in getting ready to go to the park?
- She also gets to learn words as well as concepts and practice using them. There's a pond in the park; there's water in the pond; you can touch the water in the pond.

¹ <http://www.familyconnect.org/info/browse-by-age/infants-and-toddlers/parenting-and-family-life-iandt/routines-tools-for-your-childs-development/1235>



Patience Is Essential

It takes a lot of patience to teach, watch, and wait for your child to complete tasks such as dressing herself or the steps involved in putting silverware on the kitchen table. You could do it for her much faster, but it's so important to give her the time she needs to finish at her own pace. It's equally important to let her know, in words, or with a hug, that she's succeeded.

To help your child learn a routine, first look at the steps she needs to do. For example, to help you set the table:

- First, she needs to know where to find the utensils.
- Second, she needs to recognize spoons, forks, and knives.
- Third, she has to be able to count how many of each to bring to the table.
- And then, to complete the task, she has to learn where to place each setting of fork, knife, and spoon. You can help her learn by explaining why setting the table is necessary and what is involved in doing it and then by demonstrating it for her.

There are ways in which you can help your child develop routines:

- Look at the steps she needs to do and pick one or two new ones to teach her. For example, you may need to show her how to put toothpaste on her toothbrush, rather than you doing it for her. A good way to show her is to use either hand-under-hand or hand-over-hand technique while standing behind her.
- If your child can't remember what to do next, you can prompt her to do the next step. First, try a verbal prompt like, "What do you need to pick up next," and if that doesn't work, you can pat her hand or arm to encourage her. Sometimes you may need to physically do something together. To avoid your child's becoming dependent on you always telling her the next step, once you see she can do a step, decrease—or "fade"—your assistance.
- Think about how you can use color and high contrast in your home for your child if she has low vision. If part of her morning routine is to pack her backpack, pick items for her that she can easily see such as a light-colored hat on a dark table.
- If your child is blind or has a severe visual impairment, it will be helpful to use braille and textures in her routines. For example, if part of the breakfast routine is that she gets her cereal out of the cabinet, put a braille label or other tactile marking she can feel on the box so she can pick her cereal out from her brother's.

The simple, everyday routines that you teach your child now can serve as building blocks for learning more complex skills and be a strong foundation for future learning, maturity, and independence.

