

DIFFUSING NIGHT-TIME STRESS

Many families find evenings are packed with a stressful competition: individual and family needs versus an endless “to do” list. At any time of year, evenings for parents of young children can be chaotic and filled with anxiety. Add in a long winter and the inevitable cabin fever and children get antsy, sibling fights increase, negative feelings creep in, and evenings can become almost unbearable. Today, parents of young children also have an added pressure... ensuring each child is fully prepared to succeed in school. Thankfully, taking the time to incorporate a few strategies can alleviate stress, increase quality time, decrease negative behaviors, and teach children some of the skills they need for school.

Establishing routines is one concrete way to move nightly chaos toward an organized flow that will help children be successful. Routines work because young children are *event* oriented more than *clock* oriented. Therefore, a child naturally expects what usually happens at a certain time of day will happen again. If the event occurs, the child

will find comfort. If not, he or she may become distressed. Thus, establishing patterns of events and expectations can show a child what is expected and lead to a more relaxed and cooperative environment. Below are ideas for integrating routines. Many of the ideas can also be used independently and at different times of day.

TO ESTABLISH SUCCESSFUL ROUTINES

1. Consider “must dos”: Write down everything you need to do between 5 and 9 pm each night: ✓ connect with child, ✓ cook dinner, ✓ eat, ✓ clean up, ✓ bath time, ✓ connect with partner, ✓ bed time tasks, ✓ book time. How about if you throw in shopping, paying bills, exercise, laundry, or children’s activities? Is this list realistic?

2. Take something out: Look for items on the list that can be taken care of outside of this stressful time. For example, before the work week starts, make several meals for the week, have clothes washed and ready, and prepare healthy daily snacks and have ready in your car.

3. Add something in:

- **Exercise.** Lack of activity and sun makes everyone crabby. A short walk or five minute wrestle time can work wonders for the whole family.

- **A special bin.** Put together a special bin with a toy or activity that the child really likes (Play-doh and cookie cutters, crayons and paper, blocks, or other activities). Pull the bin out at the same part of the nightly routine. This will buy an extra 10 minutes, if needed, and give the child something to look forward to.

- **A ritual.** Think of something you can add that will have emotional meaning for the child. Sometimes, picking a child up at childcare can be very stressful. Add something fun for the child to look forward to: a special hug, hand shake, snack surprise, song or story telling in the car.

4. Establish partnerships: Decide which parts of the “to do” list can be done *with* the child or how multiple needs can be taken care



of at the same time. Maybe the adult who needs physical activity can run outside with the child for 10 minutes while the other (who needs quiet time) can start dinner. Make sure to include the child in some of the "chores". For example, the parent and child could wash vegetables for dinner together while talking about the day. The child will feel like a contributing member of the family and come to value this time spent together. Quality time can happen during everyday moments. It does not have to be something extra.

5. Determine your plan: To ensure success, think needs first. Is there any way to address your needs prior to picking up your child? What will help you enter into a relaxed and supportive state of mind? You can anticipate that after a day in childcare, your child will often be very needy and agitated. If your pressing needs are covered, it will be easier to stay calm and engaged and meet your child's needs. Then, figure out what your child needs to be successful during this time of day. If your child is highly sensitive to lights, sounds, and activity, downtime will likely be a high priority. If the child needs physical activity to feel good, it's likely exercise. Look for patterns that indicate which is most important and then follow your child's lead.

6. Make a picture chart: Once you have established an evening routine, make a picture chart with the sequence of events. Preschoolers will enjoy following along with the pictures as the different tasks start and stop. Just point out the next picture and talk about what is coming up. A picture chart can help smooth out transitions and reduce power struggles. Visit the "parent" page at www.FirstSteps.us for simple ideas and photos.

Building in routines takes time but is worth the effort. Routines encourage cooperation in young children while teaching self discipline and organizational skills. This helps with the chaos of today with payoffs in the future. For example, if every evening a young child is expected to help with chores, this will become part of the routine and over time will be met with little resistance. As the child gets older, assisting with chores will contribute to the ease of the evening while teaching children to be successful at school and in the work world where personal responsibility and teamwork skills are a benefit.

It is sometimes difficult in the heat of the nightly meltdown to consider building in routines for future success. However, routines incorporate valuable habits and skills that will help children flourish in school, work, and life.

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First Steps Business Alliance brings community resources to working families.

In 2005, the Rochester Area Foundation launched First Steps, a community-wide effort to help children succeed by making sure they are ready for school. First Steps believes there are many ways to help children be ready to succeed starting with supporting parents and caregivers, children's most important teachers.

CALL TO PARENTS

First Steps collaborates with high quality educational partners to bring important tips, information, and support to parents and child care providers. We currently coordinate parent/family education seminars in the workplace. However, all parents want their children to thrive. So, you tell us when, where, who and let's get an educational experience coordinated for you! Information can be delivered in different languages, in a variety of locations, and for diverse groups in the community. Let us know how we can help. Call First Steps at 282-1027 for more information or to share your insights with us.

Rochester area parenting resources and information:

- PAIRR family education classes – More information at <http://www.rochesterce.org/pairr>
- Rochester Public Library – Event information is at www.rochesterpubliclibrary.org/kids
- When your child turns 3, schedule an early childhood preschool screening/check-in. Call 328-4004 for more information.
- First Steps Business Alliance – Advocate for work-life seminars in your work place and for your business to become part of the First Steps Business Alliance. Information at www.firststeps.us.

Online resources:

- www.parentsknow.state.mn.us
- www.zerotothree.org
- www.c2r2.org/
- www.workingfamilyresourcecenter.org
- www.bornlearning.org
- www.rochesterfamilies.com
- education.umn.edu/ceed/publications/questionsaboutkids/
- www.civitas.org



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