



I have rarely met a family that hasn't struggled in some way with getting their children through daily routines. Common complaints include: "Ethan whines and protests every single step", or, "Talia's refusal to cooperate is forcing us to nag and bribe her which is driving us crazy and we know is messed up. We're all miserable by the time we walk out the door." Families with young children face these types of struggles because most toddlers have some degree of difficulty with transitions.

There are several reasons children have a hard time moving from one task to another during morning and bedtime routines, including:

- Young children are quite zealous about asserting some control over their world. This means that whenever there is a demand to follow someone else's agenda, such as yours, there is a natural tendency to defy it.
- It is hard for many children to move from one activity to another. They become absorbed in what they are doing and making a transition takes a lot of effort.
- Sometimes children have not actually tuned in to the direction you are giving them. They haven't processed all of the information being communicated to them, so they can't effectively act on it.
- Some children are very distractible. They start to follow a direction, but something catches their attention and they lose track of what they are supposed to be focused on.

- Morning and nighttime routines are associated with separations, such as going to child care/school, saying goodnight, etc. This can be emotionally challenging for young children.

The following strategies address these underlying issues and can help children better cope with daily routines. Note that the content below builds on a recent newsletter that focused on "[Cracking the Cooperation Code](#)", so you will see many of the strategies described in that edition applied here.

- **Acknowledge that separations are hard.** Feelings are what drive children's behavior. The more we name and empathize with our children's emotions the less likely it is that they will have to act them out. "I know, mornings can be hard. We have to get ready for work and school and then say goodbye until dinnertime." Once you have shown understanding you can help your child cope: "But, we all have important jobs to do during the day. Yours is to play with grandma/go to school and learn all sorts of cool stuff and mine is to (fill in the blank). Why don't we read four pages of your favorite book before we leave for school, then the first thing we'll do when we get home is finish the book together." Creating a bridge like this between separations can be very comforting for kids and gives them something concrete to look forward to. Another bridge might be having your child help you pack a snack in the morning that you bring with you when you pick him up at the end of the day.
- **Make a visual calendar.** This provides cues as to what will happen next that can greatly ease transitions, especially when you include your child in creating the calendar. Take photos of all your child's daily routines: waking up in the morning, having breakfast, getting dressed, brushing teeth, getting into the car/bus, etc. Be sure to include the people who participate in or help with these routines. For example, take photos of Mom helping with getting dressed in the morning, Dad giving a hug at preschool drop-off, and so on. Then, help your child create the calendar, providing whatever

support she needs based on her age/ability. Guide her to choose photos that depict each step of the routine and tape them up on any kind of paper/cardboard (some families get really fancy and use Velcro) in chronological order. You might even have her choose what she will have for breakfast and include it on the calendar. Give her two choices (have visuals for the various options) and put the photo of the food she chooses on the calendar as well. This can reduce challenges in the morning. Go through the same process for the evening/nighttime routine. Take photos of every important step of the process. You can create the calendar for the evening routine at the time you feel would work best for your child. Some families do it during breakfast for kids who fiercely depend on predictability and like to know exactly what is coming down the pike. For some children, this is too much to process in the morning; in this case, it works better to create a ritual of doing a brief family meeting before dinner to go over what the plan will be for the whole evening. For example, dinner, bath, tooth-brushing, books, bed. Again, be sure to take photos of all the people who might be involved in these routines so your child knows exactly what to expect: Daddy is doing bath tonight and Papa is the book-reader. Finally, provide a way for children to note that they have completed a task. They might put a check-mark or a sticker next to each photo as they move through the routine. This can be very motivating for kids.

- **Provide a warning to help children anticipate a transition.** As many of you know, I am a big fan of the [Time-Timer](#) because it provides a clear visual that helps children track how much time they have left. (Be sure to place it where your child can see it but be sure it's out of her reach or, like most clever children, she will add time.) "Lucy, there's only a little red left on Time-Timer. When he makes his beeping noise, it will be time to put the blocks away and take a bath." ***Then add a choice to give your child some sense of control:*** "Do you want to play with the animal or planet stickers in

the bath tonight?” This also helps her anticipate what will come next in a positive way.

- **Be sure your child is tuning in to and processing what you are communicating to him.** It can be very helpful to establish a cue with your child for when you want his attention. One family I recently visited established a routine of placing a hand firmly and lovingly on their child’s shoulder to signal, “I have something to tell you. It’s time to stop doing what you’re doing and focus on me.” The more ritualized these cues become the more powerful they are. Some other tools for securing your child’s attention that were introduced in the *Cracking the Cooperation Code* newsletter include teaching your child about:
 - **“Pause”:** Explain to your child that when you stretch out your arm and hold up your hand as you say, “pause”, it means to “stop what you’re doing and get your body ready to listen.” You use “pause” to cue children to tune in when more typical strategies for getting their attention, such as calling their name or telling them you have a question to ask them, haven’t worked. (When we call children’s names over-and-over they tend to tune it out—think Charlie Brown’s teacher.) If your child is still not tuning in to you, you might need to place a hand over the object your child is still messing with and guide his hands to his lap to provide additional support for turning his brain onto what you need to communicate to him.
 - **Brain teasers:** These are distractions that call your child’s attention away from what he needs to be focusing on. Imagine you’ve directed your child to get his coat but on his way he gets sidetracked by a dump truck. You might say: “Oops, dump truck brain teaser. What was your job?” This provides a cue to get him back on track in a positive way, without nagging.

- **Communicate directions clearly:** “Austin, I have a direction: please place your dish in the sink.” “Rumi, it’s time to go upstairs to take a bath.” This helps your child know exactly what is expected which is comforting to kids. Because giving a direction may feel dictatorial and we want to be “polite”, most of us tend to pose a direction as a question, such as: “Rumi, can you come upstairs?” Or, “Rumi, time to go upstairs, okay?” The problem is that these seemingly benign phrases are confusing to the child, who hears that you’re giving her a choice, which then causes frustration for parents when kids don’t comply. One recent example: a mom asked her 4-year-old multiple times, “Can you please come to the dinner table?” The child (logically) responded, “No, I’m not done with my game.” ([Click here](#) for more about providing clear choices and expectations.)
- **Use the concept of “two great choices!” to let your child know his options. Continuing to avoid or protest is not one of them:** “Charlie, the direction is to go upstairs for bath. You have two great choices: you can go upstairs on your own, or, I will carry you up. You decide.” Focusing on the fact that your child is the decider and you are just implementing the consequences of his choices makes children feel more in control and less defiant. Many parents worry that this is somehow giving in to the child, i.e., carrying him up the stairs; but what’s the alternative? Waiting for your child to comply puts him in the driver’s seat for how the evening routine will go. This dynamic is not healthy for you or your child and results in a lot of unpleasant battles. Rest assured, once you follow through on this limit a few times your child will be hopping or slithering up the stairs on his own. You can use this strategy for every step of the routine: “Time-Timer says we have 20 minutes for breakfast. You have two great choices: you can eat enough food to fill your belly up; or, if you choose to play instead of eat, then we will put your food in a container to take with you in case you get hungry.” “It’s time to get our hands clean for dinner. Your choice is to wash your hands in the sink or use a wipe.” If your child runs away, you simply

approach him as calmly as possible, give him a bear hug and use a wipe to clean his hands without any anger. You are simply showing him that any tactics that aren't acceptable or good for him won't work. That's how children ultimately learn to adapt and make good choices.

- **Incentivize cooperation:** A natural consequence of cooperating is that it saves time which can translate into more opportunity to do desired activities. You might explain to your child that he has 10 minutes to get dressed, alone or with your help. If he cooperates, he banks 5 minutes. Same for getting shoes on, etc. You can add up the time he has saved and at the end of the day he gets a choice of say, 10 extra minutes of play- or book-time before bed. This can serve as a powerful incentive. It is also a great alternative to using rewards or negative consequences, which often have no connection to the actual "incident", can be shaming, and tend to backfire.
- **Give your child some sense of control over the transition:** "It's time to get into the car. You have a choice: do you want to bring a book or listen to a story on tape?" "It's time to go upstairs for bath. You have a choice, should we hop like a bunny or slither up the stairs like a snake?" The more your child feels he has some control over the process the more likely he is to comply.
- **Acknowledge your child's emotions and desires:** "I know, you love to color and it's so hard to stop doing something that's so much fun. But Time-Timer is telling us that it's time for what's next on our schedule—getting dressed!" Remember, when you validate your child's feelings, it makes it less likely she will need to act them out.
- **Let your child know when she'll be able to do the desired activity again:** "You can color again when we get home this afternoon while Daddy is making dinner. What do you want to draw tonight?" When you acknowledge your child's desire and confirm that she will be able to do what she wants eventually, you reduce the stress typically experienced when

children can't get what they want right away. It calms them and puts them in a more positive frame of mind, which makes them more willing to comply.

- **Stay positive, even in the face of your child's protests:** Your tone is infectious. When you get revved up and this kind of thing comes rolling off your tongue: "If you don't put the crayons down on the count of three you won't have them for a week!", it elicits an oppositional reaction and puts children in a more defiant posture. This makes it less likely that they will comply. Instead, try: "Mommy is going to be a helper and put these crayons away so you can focus on eating your breakfast." Just because your child is losing it doesn't mean you have to join her. The more calm and non-reactive you remain the more likely it is that she will get calm and comply.

Of course, every child is different. These strategies are great for some kids and not effective for others. For example, some kids respond well to making a breakfast choice the night before. For other children, it just leads to a breakdown in the morning when they change their minds. You know your child best. Use your judgment and adapt these tools to best meet your child's and your family's needs.