

Morning Hassles With Your Preschooler

Family Psychology of South Bend

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Sick and tired of getting started on the wrong foot with the children in the morning? Tired of herding the children through the morning sequence – out of bed, dressed, fed, school supplies readied? If so, you are in good company. Some of the most common complaints I hear in my office are related to the painful morning routine. Before having children, it was difficult enough for us to get ourselves going in the morning. Now we feel responsible for getting the children going too. It doesn't have to be this way. Your children can be responsible for themselves in the morning. And yes, you deserve to wake up to a calm household and even enjoy a cup of coffee in peace!

The morning stress endures partly because of two myths we live by.

Myth #1 – My children don't like school, and I have to get them to like it.

Usually one child will complain that they don't want to go to school. They profess to hate it or just whine that they don't want to go. We parents take up the challenge to remind and convince our little one that school is fun and the teachers are nice. Almost by instinct parents point to recess or play-time, lunch, or a fun activity planned after school. Sometimes we remind our children of their unguarded admission from the previous week that their teacher is nice and school is fun.

If they like school, why do they whine and cry and insist it is awful? Because in a pre-conscious, behaviorally-conditioned way, they have learned that by displaying discontent, adults will get busy making their lives better. More than the reminder of all the good things they can count on, we often "sweeten the pot" with something special for breakfast, a special activity after school, or a promised favor.

Break this myth's hold on your family by refusing to convince them to like school. Acknowledge their feelings and sentiments. Just don't try to make it better. Reflective listening is a powerful way out. "You don't feel like going to school today. You are not happy with your teacher at school. You would rather stay home." These words of acknowledgement affirm your child's opinion and feelings without taking on the responsibility to change them.

Having side-stepped their invitation to get busy making their day better, simply move forward with the morning. Lead from the front and try not to coral from behind. Left face to face with the day and their feelings, children draw on their own resources to get out of bed and move forward with the day. You can always talk about their discontent another time but refrain from the conversation in the morning. Remember that it is very common for preschoolers to complain about school in the morning even though they clearly enjoy the time with friends and staff after being dropped off. You should see a marked improvement in less than one week.

Myth #2 – My child sleeps too deeply to wake on the first try.

If this myth is operative in your family, your child will require three or four or maybe seven attempts to rouse them. They can sleep through alarm clocks too, even the loudest one in the house.

In truth, any of us can learn to sleep through familiar noise. It took me only three days to sleep through Chicago's Brown Line train rattling past my bedroom window when I lived 20 feet from the tracks in graduate school. Similarly, our children learn to sleep through our calls and back rubs and threatening each morning, evidently waiting for signs that we mean business before getting up.

On the other hand, we can all learn to wake up to reliable cues, even our internal clocks. I went a full academic year in college, for example, never hearing my morning alarm because I woke up exactly two minutes before the piercing beeping was set to sound each morning. And I've learned that our children can wake to alarms and parents' common efforts to rouse them if we refuse to nag and repeat ourselves. But we don't allow common efforts to be the reliable cues for waking. Our kids typically get up when we hit a certain pained and threatening tone or a level of frustration. These are the real cues, the predictable signs that we are ready to start the day.

When helping a family in my office with morning problems, I routinely ask the deep sleeper how many times they can get their parents to call them in the morning before they get up. Almost all answer the question. None find it to be an absurd question. At some level, they know there is a payoff for getting Mom or Dad to work hard at this. They either get parents busy with them and therefore position their parents to give undue service for the rest of the morning, or they score a victory in demonstrating their parents are relatively powerless and cannot call the shots every step of the way.

Breaking free of Myth #2 is more difficult than Myth #1 but can be done in a single morning. Sit down with your child at a calm time and explain you are tired of nagging and fighting with them in the morning. Then explain the new plan to them.

The first step is to call to your child only once at the normal waking time and move forward with your morning. If you can refrain from the urge to repeatedly call to them or jostle and cajole them out of bed, they will learn to wake to your voice or an alarm clock. Or they might learn to wake to the noise of breakfast preparation. Often, hearing their sibling amble down the hall or stairs to breakfast is a large motivation to get with the program. They don't want siblings to enjoy Mom's undivided attention. Whatever the cue, it must not be drowned out by nagging.

To follow through on step one, you have to be ready to leave the house with your child in some state of unreadiness. For preschoolers, have a bag of clothes at the door the night before. If your child is late the first morning of the new plan, take your child to the car and grab the bag on your way out. Once at school, they can choose to get dressed in the car or in the school. If this is done without nagging, threatening and anger, you will see a vast improvement the next morning. I enjoy calling it The One-Day Cure. But be honest with yourself about nagging and anger. Are you prepared to risk sending them to school one day without breakfast? Are you prepared to feel unsettled about what the preschool staff might be thinking? Are you prepared to act as if you are not challenged by your child's objections and possible tantrum in the car? For one morning?

If not, please do not attempt this. It will backfire and your child will perceive it as a scheme to over-power them. If you can have confidence in your child, however, and can stand up to these two unconscious myths, you can reclaim a peaceful morning. Enjoy conversation with your children, the newspaper, and, ahhh... a cup of coffee in peace.

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