



A Smoother Day — Schedules and Routines



Why Is a Daily Routine Important?

In an active learning setting, we organize time into a **daily routine**. The routine determines how we'll use the play space and play yard and what types of interactions children will experience during each part of the day. This predictable daily sequence of events, in which children can anticipate what will happen next, gives them a sense of control and a feeling of confidence. The daily routine also helps us organize time in ways that offer them interesting and challenging learning experiences.

What are the benefits of a predictable and consistent daily routine?

- **The daily routine promotes children's development by supporting their choices, decisions, and plans.** The routine provides a structure within which children can decide what they want to do. We develop the routine with their needs and interests in mind and provide opportunities for them to express their goals, follow through on their plans, and solve problems. These opportunities provide the foundation for children's physical, social, and mental growth. We don't have to worry about keeping children "on track" during the day because they are already pursuing activities they find interesting. In contrast, following routines based solely on *adult* needs — or following no routine at all — takes away children's sense of control. They become passive rather than active learners, always waiting for adults to tell them what they can do and when.
- **The daily routine provides a predictable social framework.** The daily routine sets the stage for the social interactions that develop during the day. By participating with the group in the same series of events each day, children become part of a supportive, family-like community. Children know that at certain times of the day they will do certain things together (eat, play, nap, play outside, and so forth). Knowing what to expect helps them feel secure and in control and frees up their energies for exploring and learning. Understanding that they will have predictable opportunities for play is especially important for children; this makes them feel more comfortable and lessens frustration and conflict. The predictability of the routine is also particularly important because many young children are separating from

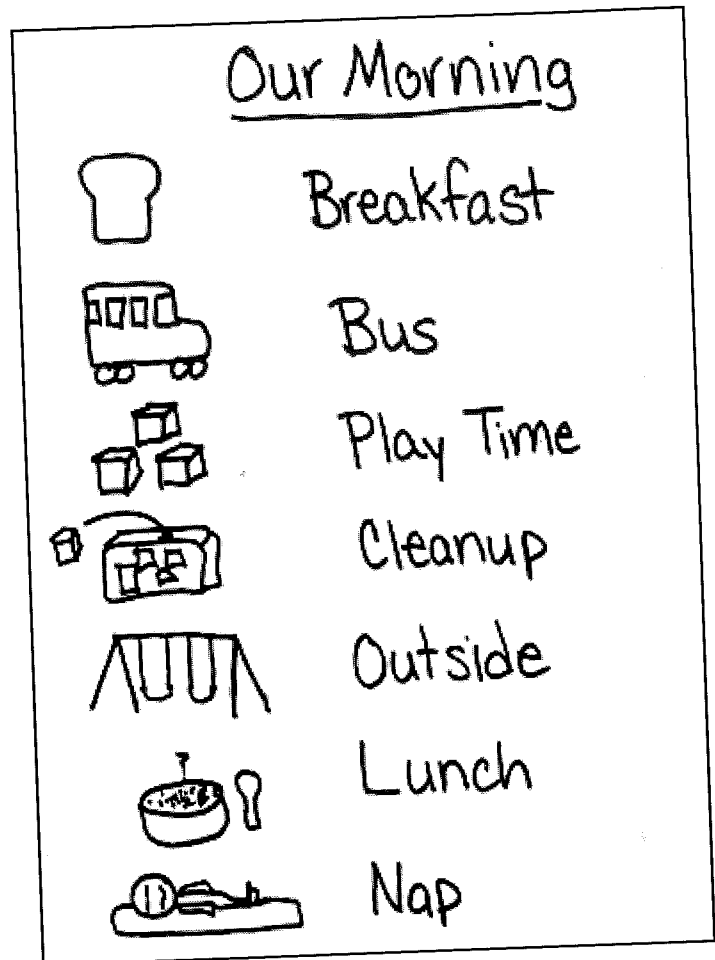
home for the first time. They come to depend on a regular sequence of events as much as they come to trust the familiar faces of the people in the setting. A further advantage of a predictable routine is that it concretely introduces the concepts of time and sequence to children who are not yet ready to use the clock or a written schedule to understand time.

- **The daily routine provides a flexible structure.** It is an alternative to a rigid schedule on one hand and totally unpredictable events on the other. While the order of events in the routine is predictable, what happens within each part of the routine is determined by children's needs and interests. As the day unfolds, we think about whether we're providing children with the important learning experiences they need for all-around development. When a special event is planned — such as an outing or errand — we remember to prepare children beforehand, since knowing what to expect helps children enjoy a full range of learning experiences.
- **The daily routine enables providers to meet the needs of a wide range of children more effectively.** In the active learning approach, providers consider the unique needs of every age group and of individual children, and this is especially important in a family child care setting where the age range may be wide. Here are some specific advantages of a consistent routine in settings serving children of mixed ages and diverse needs. The routine
 - Helps the day run smoothly and thereby increases the provider's time to cook, clean, change diapers, or simply play and interact with the children
 - Enables the older children to function more independently because they know what will be happening during each part of the day, allowing the provider to turn her attention to the younger children as needed
 - Allows infants and toddlers to develop a sense of order in their lives, paving the way for them to follow the routine independently as they grow into preschoolers
 - Helps new children adjust to the program more quickly because they can focus on playing and getting to know the other children instead of being stressed because they don't understand how their day will flow
 - Provides a framework providers can use to plan activities based on observations of and input from all the children, thus meeting the needs of each child more effectively

- **The daily routine helps adults who come and go interact more smoothly with the program.** Knowing what to expect is not only important for the children but also for all the adults who have contact with the program. For example, because the routine is predictable, parents who arrive at different parts of the day know what is going on and can help their child make a comfortable transition into or out of the program. The routine also helps backup providers in an emergency situation understand what to do next — many times the children themselves are able to tell the backup provider what to do, how to do it, and when.

Planning a Routine that Works for Your Group

The daily routines within a household provide wonderful occasions for learning and exploring. Routines such as fixing lunch turn into cooking experiences. Watering household plants becomes a science lesson. However, implementing just *one* routine in a family child care program can seem difficult to do, since the needs of the different children tend to dictate what will be done and when! An infant can't wait for play time to be finished before he gets his bottle, and preschool children can't be expected to participate in an activity planned for young toddlers. So your challenge will be in deciding how to address all the children's needs while establishing a routine that is consistent and predictable for the group as a whole.

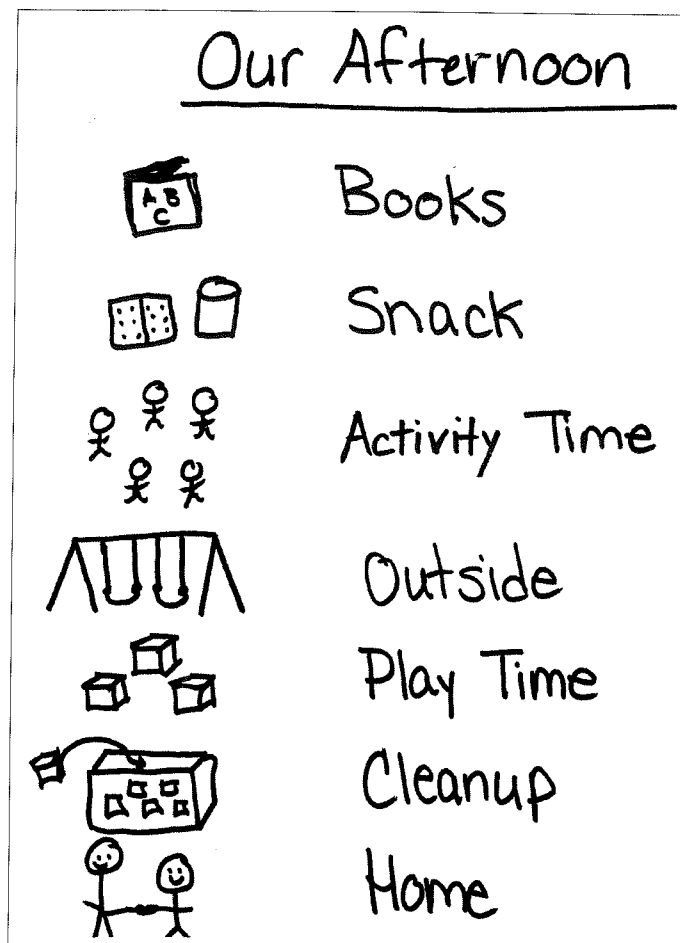


Below are examples of how some components of the daily routine might look in a family child care home that serves infants, toddlers, preschool children, and school-aged children who attend the program before and after school and during summer and holiday breaks. (*Hint: Note that not all children are actively engaged in play throughout the day but are still contributing to the program.*)

Arrivals

In family child care programs children often arrive at different times throughout the program day. Providers, therefore, need to plan how to meet and greet incoming parents and children

while supervising and caring for the children already present. If there is more than one caregiver, one adult may be the “greeter” while another is with the children.



In a small program where the provider is the only caregiver, she may be busy feeding a baby the first bottle of the day as the other children arrive. In this case, perhaps some of the incoming children may be able to begin making their own breakfast with easy-to-prepare menu items such as peanut butter on toast or cereal and milk. Or, if they have already eaten, children can ease into the morning routine by looking at books or playing with table toys near other children who are eating.

Play Time

During play time, providers are actively engaged with the children in the play areas if not performing routine duties

such as cleaning, cooking, or changing diapers. Younger infants may play in a special area designated just for them as the older children are moving about in the house. Or, a provider may hold an infant while moving about, interacting with the other children. This can be a very exciting and stimulating time for the infants, as they see all the action taking place around them. This scenario is not at all unlike what happens in a regular family household that has more than one child. The infants move with the mother or father as needed to keep up with the older children!

Activity times

At this time of day, children engage in planned activities with the whole group of children or part of the group. These times are flexible to adapt to meet the needs of all children in the program.

When an activity is planned for a specific smaller segment of the group such as the older children, we think of it as a small-group activity. Small-group times are designed so that the activity can continue even if the provider is interrupted. For example, if a provider needs to change diapers or help in a conflict, the materials are set up so the children can continue to explore and create without having to stop and start. Making homemade play dough is an example of such an activity. The provider sets all the dough-making ingredients at the table where the children will sit, along with straws, smooth rocks the children have collected, and letter-shaped cookie cutters. Children can mix and feel the play dough with their hands and experiment with the materials.

The term “large-group time” might be used for an activity in which children of every age group can participate on their own level. Infants can join a large-group activity by sitting on their own and watching, by watching while being held by the provider, or by observing close by on a blanket. Or, the older children may engage in the planned activity while the younger children remain in “free play” mode. Large-group activities may be modified for the toddlers so they can participate successfully.

An example of a large-group activity that was successful for preschoolers, toddlers, and infants was one planned by a provider using donated scarves and a CD of traditional Irish music. She introduced the activity by asking children to join her in “Irish dancing,” which she portrayed by waving a scarf and imitated some of the movements she had recently seen in a dance video. The preschoolers in her group enjoyed waving scarves and imitating some of the foot movements. The toddlers moved their whole bodies and played with the scarves, with some taking them to other areas. Meanwhile, the provider and caregivers used the scarves to play peek-a-boo with the infants.

Meals and snacks

Getting children involved in meal and snack routines not only helps out caregivers who are juggling multiple tasks but also encourages children to develop responsibility through learning to care for others and exercising self-help skills. Many times providers will establish a meal- or snacktime job chart for children that allows the older children to sign up for weekly or daily

chores, such as passing out cups or setting out the milk. Other providers have all the children participate equally in the daily setup and cleanup for the meal.

Outside time

Outside time is another time when providers can interact with the children. Providers will use a variety of interaction strategies to encourage all children to use their gross motor skills and interact with nature. In a mixed-age program, outside time needs to be planned around the younger infants' sleeping schedules and diaper changes.

With a mixed-age group, providers can expect more types of physical play; therefore, it is always important to keep safety in mind, particularly for the younger toddlers and for the infants. For example, infants may need a safe play "corral" placed in an area of the yard where they are visible, but out of the way of flying balls!

When there is access to local parks, individual providers may pair up so that one adult can help supervise the older toddlers, preschoolers, and school-aged children while another adult helps with the babies in a place that is more central, visible, and safer.

Departures

Family child care providers make their own business decisions and so are able to control the amount of care they provide and when they provide it. This may mean that one provider ends care for all children at 5 p.m., whereas another may offer extended care. This decision will affect how departure time is carried out.

Just as at arrival time, at departure time providers who are also the sole caregiver may find it necessary to limit the number of play choices given to children so that the children can be supervised while a caregiver talks with a parent.

Bodily care routines

Bodily care routines include bottle-feeding, changing diapers, toilet training, and mealtimes. For younger children bodily care routines are important occasions for receiving one-on-one attention from the provider. Young children are able to form strong bonds and healthy attachments with

the provider when their most basic needs are consistently met in a loving and gentle manner. On the other hand, these times are also important for encouraging independence as children learn to feed themselves, go to the bathroom, wash their own hands, and maybe even brush their teeth!

Although these events happen daily and may seem to take on a “routine” feel, it is important for child care providers to continue to view these times as important learning opportunities for children of all ages. The benefits for children are immeasurable!

The following points are useful to keep in mind in regard to bodily care routines:

- When caring for a mixed-age group that includes infants, keep the diaper-changing table in an area of the house that allows you to continue interacting with the older children.
- Encourage the independence of older children by keeping step stools in the bathroom and by placing soap and paper towels on an accessible level.
- Where possible, work closely with parents on toilet training. And keep in mind that toddlers often model their behavior after preschoolers’, which can facilitate the transition into toilet training!
- If you find an older child is jealous of a younger one who needs extra attention for bodily care, help the older child to feel included by inviting him or her to become involved in the care of the younger child. Another strategy is to give the older child attention while the younger one is napping.

The daily routine events described here are meant as examples; they are not meant to dictate a routine for a particular family child care setting. Providers who keep the principles in this booklet in mind as they plan a consistent daily routine will find that their children will thrive and their day will go more smoothly.

Successful Routines

- Balance your daily routine so that times of high activity alternate with quieter times.
- Name each part of your routine so children learn the names and what to expect.
- Help children learn the routine by following it consistently, using the names of segments of the routine in conversations with children.
- Review the routine each morning with children, using a daily routine chart.
- Give children a warning before they have to switch activities.
- Tell children what is coming next.
- Point out any changes in the regular routine.

Supporting Children During Transitions

- Take the child's perspective: *I'm having fun, I'm tired, or I'm hungry.*
- Keep the characteristics of young children in mind; they can't sit and wait, they like to be in control, they like to keep playing, and they like to do things for themselves, which may take longer.
- Give children a warning before asking them to stop what they are doing.
- Give children the time they need to move through the transition without rushing.
- Make transitions fun.

A Smoother Day

1. Think about your day. Write down one part of your day that you would like to go more smoothly.
2. List ideas that you now have to make this part of your day go smoothly.
3. How will you introduce your ideas to the children?
4. How will you share your new routine with the parents?