

## Establishing a school routine

The key to a stress-free school run begins with an organised routine. The amount of tension generated by running around the house searching for your children's P.E. kits, homework or school bag - when you should already be on your way to school - is huge. Being persistently late to school, as well as leading to disciplinary action, can affect a child's attainment and ability to settle. The good news is that the frantic morning atmosphere can be avoided, or at least tempered, with a bit of organisation. Much distress can be avoided through helping your child establish a regular routine.

### **Get prepared the night before**

A stress-free morning should start with an organised evening routine. Being prepared the night before is key. You'll cut out a lot of unnecessary steps in the morning, which will allow you to focus on the more important tasks like eating, washing and dressing.

Check the school timetable with your child. By getting your children involved in this step, you can encourage them to develop responsibility for their possessions and time management. Together, you can put together a checklist of what you need to prepare the night before which might include:

- School uniform (inc. shoes, socks, etc.)
- Packed lunches - make any sandwiches and prepare all food so it's ready to go
- Check that all homework has been completed
- Sign any letters or paperwork for the school
- Pack the school bag
- P.E. kit or other special equipment needed on particular days

### **Get up early**

In the morning, ensure that everyone wakes up with more than enough time to get everything done. Think about how much time you reasonably need to get ready...then add on another 20 minutes. Mother of three, Toni Loughrey, agrees: 'It's better to allow more time than you think you need to get everyone ready,' she says. 'That way if things are going well, you can even get 'extras' done, like putting the washing machine on or maybe grabbing five minutes to go through spellings or hear them read.'

### **Plan breakfast**

Your children will be easier to feed if they are given options. Obviously there will not be time for specific orders, but a choice of cereals or different spreads for toast will help children feel in control, and encourage them to look forward to breakfast.

Mum of two, Joanne Fisher, says: 'Breakfast always causes a row in our house. My son always says he doesn't want any and I always say he has to eat something. I never seem to have what he wants, despite reeling off a list of cereals. If he didn't have breakfast, I'd worry he'd be starving hungry at school.'

Some children don't feel hungry at home, then become ravenous on the way to school. If that's the case, you could give them a cereal bar or perhaps some dried fruit to take with them so they've something to eat before the bell goes. And it's usually a good idea to have breakfast before getting washed and dressed to avoid last-minute disasters needing a change of uniform.

### **Getting dressed**

Getting dressed is another time-consuming task for primary school children, who are often easily distracted by other far more interesting activities!

Organising their uniform the previous evening will get rid of any worries about not being able to find it. However, some children still don't like getting dressed.

Toni Loughrey finds that competition encourages her children. 'Mine are quite competitive so if I use this to my advantage,' she says. 'If I say "Who is going to get dressed first?", they usually both race to me to try and be first.'

Resist the temptation to get too involved with helping your child get dressed. If you take over, and always tie shoes or do up buttons, your child is likely to struggle to do it themselves after P.E. and could end up feeling distressed.

Getting up earlier on a school day, leaving more time for the children to dress will quickly help them become more independent. Don't worry if they don't do it perfectly at first - they'll gradually get better with practise.

### **Get ahead**

Once being more organised in the morning has become a habit, you'll be amazed to find that you may even have some time in hand before you need to leave the house! This benefits both you and the kids and gets the day off to the right start. Now, if something unexpected occurs, such as a lost book or P.E. kit, there will be more time to find it. And when you do the school run, everyone's in a better mood. Joe North, who takes his son to school two days a week, agrees. 'Until Ben and I settled into a calm routine, things were such a panic in the mornings. I'd lose my temper because I was stressed about being late for work, and sometimes he'd be going into the playground tearful or angry. It wasn't a

good start to our day. 'I took some time to get us more organised and started getting up 20 minutes earlier. We've settled into the routine now and we haven't been late for months. We're both calmer and happier in the mornings and it's made a huge difference."

Once your child has started school, make time to talk and listen to your child each day to check how things are going. Just giving attention in this way can help your child feel supported and more confident. However, resist the temptation to ask too many questions, especially when a child first gets home from school and is likely to be tired, hungry and short-tempered from coping with many new people and things. If your child is attending boarding school, make arrangements for him or her to be able to contact you or other members of the family on agreed days and times, providing him or her with the means to make calls.