

PROVIDE A STRUCTURED, STABLE HOME LIFE



Modern families barely resemble the families of the past. Today, often half of all marriages end in divorce. New relationships result in “blended families.” And both parents work outside the home. The most basic building block of society, the family unit, has changed drastically—and children are feeling the effects.

So how can we help kids survive and even flourish in these difficult times? Short of stopping harmful trends, it’s important to provide children with the most *structured, stable* home lives possible.

Parents can do this by focusing on consistency—consistency in routines, traditions, discipline and love. Children thrive when they can rely on these essential things.

No matter what your family situation, you *can* create a more stable, structured home life and, in turn, a more successful family. The ideas in this booklet will help you with this.



**Every child is unique, so we often use the singular pronoun. But to be fair, we alternate using “he” and “she” throughout this booklet.*

Why Is a Structured, Stable Home Life So Important?

Family is the foundation of a child's life. Every child needs a healthy home environment to do her best at school and elsewhere. One sign of a healthy home is structure—an organized, consistent way of life. Another sign is stability—which provides the strength to get through the tough times.

When children have structured, stable home lives, they also have:

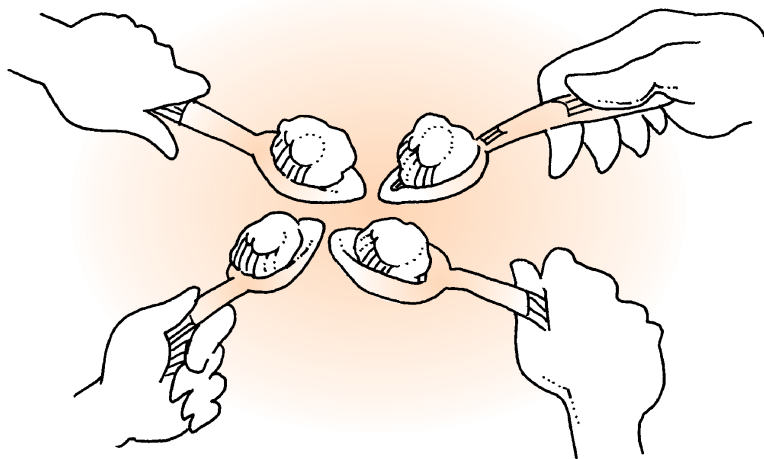
- **Security.** They know what's expected of them and how to behave. They also know that even when things don't go well, the family will survive.
- **Reliability.** Their families are strong and dependable, so they count on them for support (sometimes instead of gangs, drugs or alcohol).
- **Responsibility.** They learn through experience that things work best when everyone pitches in.
- **Pride.** Their families' priorities are reflected in habits and actions. They feel good about helping with important family goals.



Try Following a Daily Routine

Routines can help us organize small parts of our day, such as morning “rush hour.” But an overall daily routine is important, too. *Here are some necessary parts of an everyday routine:*

- **Getting ready for school.** Let your child do as much for himself as he can: waking up, showering, getting dressed, making his bed, etc. A checklist can help him get everything done.
- **Breakfast.** Eating together is a healthy way to start the day. Ask everyone to be at the table at the same time. Consider giving each person a breakfast responsibility, such as setting the table or pouring juice.
- **Leaving the house.** Put a list by the door of everything your child usually brings to school. Have him review it before he leaves. To save time, keep all school items near the door, too.
- **Dinner.** Research shows that eating dinner together strengthens family connections. Use this time to talk with your child. Cook and clean up together, also, so you’ll have more time for conversation.





- **Reading.** Set aside 30 minutes each day for reading. Read as a family, or let your child read at bedtime or in the car. Occasionally, have everyone bring books to the dinner table.

- **Bedtime.** Going to bed at the same time each night will help your child sleep better. He should have a night-time routine, such as putting schoolwork by the door, brushing teeth, choosing clothes for the next day, setting his alarm and saying goodnight.

- **Saying "I love you."** It's important to say these words before school and at bedtime, but anytime is fine! *Doing* loving things should also be part of your daily routine. For example, you might sing to your child at bedtime or hug her every day after school.

Set Up Routines Step by Step

Studies show that families of successful students have established routines. Routines help children remember what they're supposed to do, practice skills and organize their world. *Here are five steps to setting up a routine:*

1. Describe a problem you want to solve.

Pick a time when everyone is relaxed, or discuss the issue at a family meeting.

2. Brainstorm solutions and ideas, giving everyone—parents and children alike—an opportunity to make suggestions.

3. Make up a step-by-step list of what everyone will do, using everyone's best ideas. Write it down. *Here's a sample:*



- Backpacks by the door at bedtime.
- Dad in the bathroom at 6:00 a.m., Mom 6:30, Jenny 7:00, Bryan 7:15.
- All beds made by 7:25.
- Breakfast at 7:30.
- Breakfast finished by 7:50.
- Kids clean up.
- Pack lunches by 8:05.
- Everyone out the door by 8:10.

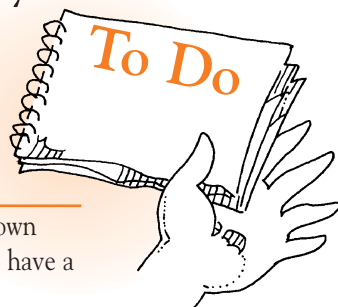
4. Practice the routine for a couple of days and make adjustments as needed. Think of ways to make it fun, such as playing music while the kids do dishes.

5. Repeat for 21 days. Experts say it takes this long for a new routine to become “automatic.”

Make Homework a Daily Habit

There's another thing your child should do every day: homework. Your child's top responsibility is being a good student, and that requires plenty of studying.

These ideas will help her develop a good homework routine:



- **Give your child a notebook** for writing down daily assignments and “to do” lists. She should also have a calendar for planning long-term projects.
- **Have your child double** check assignments and homework supplies before leaving school. One way to do this: Write assignments on small self-stick notes and put them on textbooks. At the end of the school day, everything with a note on it goes home.
- **Help your child set a regular** time for studying. Any time is okay, as long as it's not late at night. You may want to set a minimum working time so your child doesn't rush through assignments.
- **Pick a homework spot that** is comfortable and well-lit. When children study in the same place every day, they become conditioned to study there. Soon they can automatically concentrate in their study spot.
- **Turn off the TV and turn down** the music. No one can study well with the TV on. But some children concentrate better with soft music playing. Music with no words (about 60 beats per minute) seems to work best.
- **Show your child how important** study time is by working yourself. You might balance the checkbook, write letters or read. If your child doesn't have homework, she can review a subject or do extra reading.

Some Routines Are Less Frequent

Not all routines happen daily. Some happen weekly or monthly—but they're still important. Children should be able to count on them. *Here are some examples:*

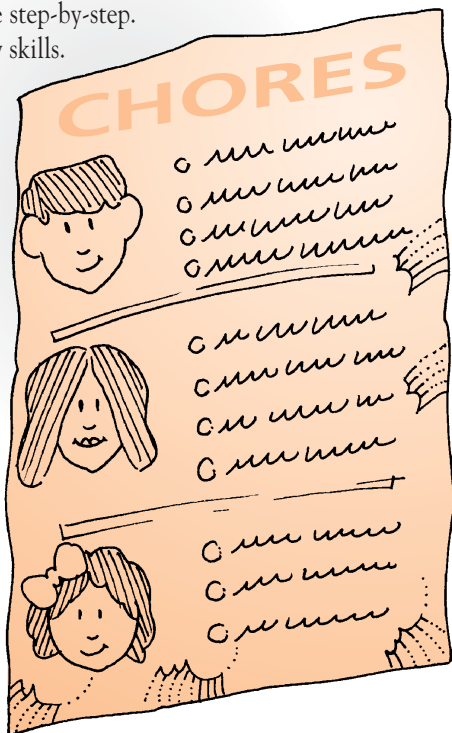


- **Trips to the library.** Make time every week for your child to check out new books and return old ones. While you're there, choose some books yourself to set a good example.
 - **Family time.** Pick one day a week for family fun. Do something everyone enjoys, such as renting movies or making pizza. Also, hold regular family meetings to discuss news, goals, concerns and successes.
 - **One-on-one time with parents.** Every child needs individual attention from parents. Think of things you can do together, such as practicing a sport after school or meeting for lunch or dinner.
 - **Volunteering.** As a family, choose a way to serve your community. You might help clean up a park or bring library books to the elderly.
 - **Planning TV time.** Children should not watch more than 10 hours of TV a week. To limit viewing, make a weekly TV plan. Help your child decide which programs to watch, then keep the TV off at other times.
 - **Extracurricular activities.** Encourage your child to participate in after-school activities she likes. But if they interfere with other important routines, such as homework or family time together, it's time to cut back.
- Tip:** Use a big calendar to keep track of family activities. Update it weekly and have everyone check it before making plans.

Include Chores in Family Routines

No family routine is complete without chores. Although many kids complain about them, chores actually have a lot of benefits. They build self-confidence, responsibility and a sense of belonging. And when everyone pitches in, family life is much easier. Here's how to add chores to your family schedule:

- **Collaborate.** Talk about the jobs that need to be done. Then help your child choose a few. Discuss what will happen if chores are neglected.
- **Explain and train.** Before giving your child a responsibility, describe exactly how it should be done. If necessary, demonstrate the chore step-by-step. Be patient as your child learns new skills.
- **Use visual aids.** Make a chart listing regular chores and the people responsible for them. Also include the deadlines for finishing jobs. As chores are completed, cross them off.
- **Don't redo your child's work.** Instead, show him how to improve it. Redoing a job hurts your child's self-esteem. If a chore doesn't get done, enforce appropriate consequences.
- **Reward with praise.** Children shouldn't be paid for doing basic chores. But they should receive compliments for their hard work.



Teach Your Child Family Traditions

Celebrating traditions is one of the best ways to give children a

sense of stability.

Traditions show that some things in life stay the same, such as values and love of family.

They build connections to older generations, and create memories to share with future ones.

Here are some tips for honoring traditions:

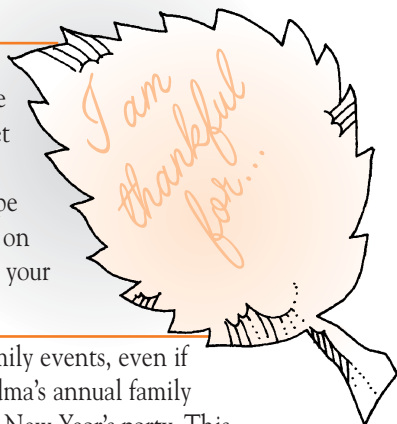


- **Begin early.** When children practice traditions early in life, they may be more likely to keep them up later. Children are never too old, however, to learn about family customs.
- **Include your child.** Children enjoy traditions more if they actively participate in them. Your child might sing one verse of a holiday song, for example, or hang a special decoration. Ask what she'd like to do.
- **Include extended family.** Some rituals have been passed from generation to generation. Sharing them with extended family gives them more meaning. Talk with relatives about how and why certain traditions were created.
- **Be flexible.** Don't continue traditions that seem wrong for your family. Create new ones that match your family's beliefs and interests. Be open to turning good experiences into traditions.

Start Your Own Traditions

Many families celebrate the same traditions, such as birthdays and holidays, in very different ways. Some families have other traditions that are completely unique. Hearing about other people's traditions can give us ideas for our own families. *Here are some traditions you might enjoy:*

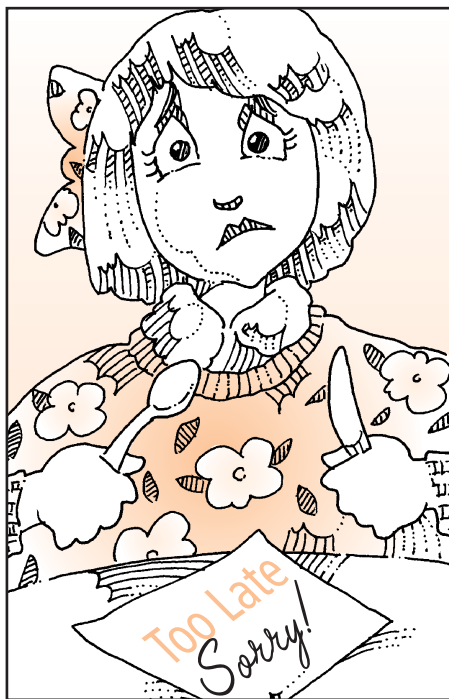
- **Holiday giving.** Each holiday season, shop for each other *and* a needy family. Let everyone pick something to give away. Or, instead of spending money, help serve a holiday meal at a homeless shelter.
- **Saying thanks.** In the month before Thanksgiving, cut out a large paper tree and hang it on a wall. Let family members write what they're thankful for on paper leaves and tape them, face down, to the tree. Then on Thanksgiving, scatter the leaves on your table and read them out loud.
- **Visiting relatives.** Attend family events, even if they require traveling. Go to Grandma's annual family reunion. Or help with Aunt Betty's New Year's party. This will build your child's sense of family and belonging.
- **Celebrating birthdays.** Write your child a birthday letter every year, highlighting his accomplishments and what you love about him. Another idea: Have the guests at his birthday party sign the tablecloth. Each year, add new names and look over the old ones.
- **Power-out night.** At least once a year, pretend the power has gone out. Gather the family and tell stories, reminisce, play games and sing songs by candlelight or flashlight.



Don't Be Afraid to Discipline

Another key to a structured, stable household is discipline. Children need and want to have limits set for them—otherwise they don't know how to behave. The goal of discipline is to *teach* children, not punish them. *Here are some elements of good discipline:*

- **Firmness.** Establish rules in a confident—not harsh or wishy-washy—voice. Send the message, “I mean what I am saying, and I will stick to it.”



- **Fairness.** Consider your child's opinion about rules, but you decide what the rules should be. Keep rules simple so they're easier to follow.
- **Consistency.** Don't bend good rules. When parents *always* enforce good rules, kids know they should *always* obey.
- **Consequences.** Let your child learn from the natural or logical results of her actions. If she gets up late, she misses breakfast. If she loses a book, she must replace it.

- **Praise.** Compliment good behavior, accomplishments and progress often. Use praise about three times more than criticism.

Get Through the Tough Times

No matter how well-run your household is, your family will face challenges. *Here are some tips for maintaining structure and stability during difficult times:*

- **Resolve conflicts quickly.**

Instead of ignoring problems and letting them grow, work on them right away. Listen carefully to each other. Focus on solutions, not blame.

- **Manage anger.** If your anger feels out of control, take a few deep breaths, count to 10 silently, or leave the situation. Seek professional help if any family member is abusive.



- **Express unconditional love.** Love is the glue that holds families together through ups and downs. Tell your child that you'll always love her, *no matter what*.



- **Keep up routines.** Children *especially* need routines in tough times, such as during a divorce or remarriage. Routines and traditions are familiar, reliable and comforting.

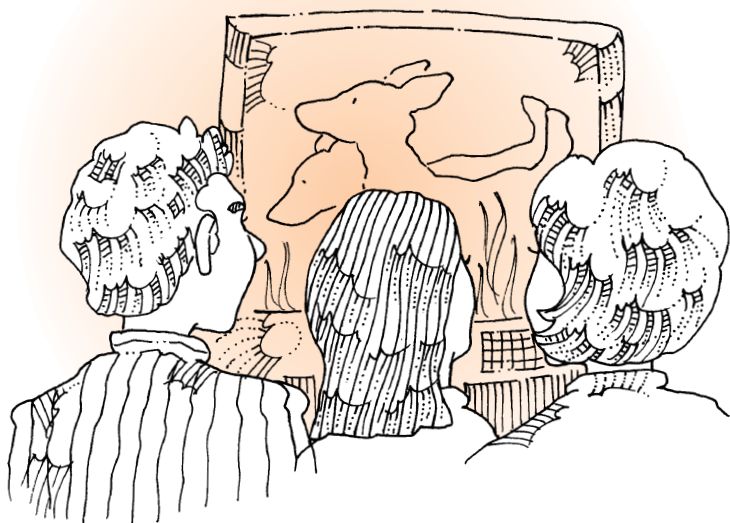
- **Create new traditions.**

Sometimes new routines help children adjust to changes. For example, a child of divorced parents might call her non-custodial parent every night. A child who has moved might write to old friends weekly.

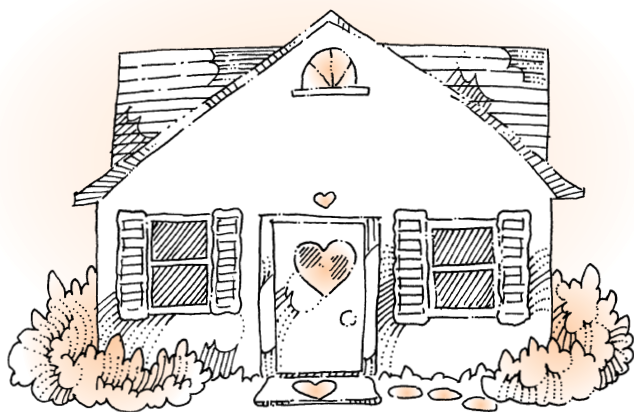
Adjust Routines at Different Ages

Children need healthy home lives at every age. But the reasons for this—and the ways parents provide structure and stability—can change as children grow. *Keep these things in mind as your child gets older:*

- **Babies** aren't too young to benefit from routines. They are comforted by regular activities, such as being bathed, held and fed. Through routines, babies learn about the world and bond with their parents.
- **Preschoolers** learn through repetition, too. They love rituals, such as being read to every night. Lists made of pictures help some children remember routines. Children this age can also start to learn about rules and chores.
- **School-age** children need rules and routines to help them with increasing responsibilities. As your child becomes more independent, start new traditions that fit her interests. For example, you might watch her favorite TV show together each week. But keep up some old traditions, too.



Your child will learn some of his most important lessons through family routines, rules and rituals. Using them to create structure and stability in your home will improve your family life now—and your child's life forever.



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