

School Mornings Without the Stress

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How to get your child up and out the door with the least amount of conflict

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During the school year, a cry is heard from parents across the land: Getting kids out the door Monday through Friday is a killer.

What makes school mornings so hard? “They’re kind of like a perfect storm,” says [David Anderson](#), PhD, a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute.

“You have a number of things that have to get done,” he explains, “and there’s also a time limit.” Add to this the fact that parents sometimes feel their kids don’t appreciate the ticking clock while they’re trying to get everyone to school and work and you’ve got a pressure cooker that can, at its worst, lead to yelling, tears, and forgotten lunches.

Dr. Anderson says one colleague calls times like school mornings—along with [homework](#), [transitioning from dinner and shower time to bedtime](#), and then [actually getting kids to sleep](#)—“frequent flyer situations,” when stress levels regularly reach their peak. He says mornings are “definitely tough for most families we talk to,” whether the child has a psychiatric *diagnosis*

or not.

However, the stress quotient can rise among families with a child who has special needs. “Kids with [ADHD](#) or [behavioral issues](#) may be much less likely to be able to maintain their focus on what they need to get done, remember what they need to get done, or may actually be defiant about getting things done like getting dressed, making their bed, taking a shower, brushing their teeth, or eating breakfast,” Dr. Anderson says.

Meanwhile, kids who are [depressed](#) may have difficulty getting out of bed, while those who are very [anxious](#) may refuse to do what’s required because they are avoiding something that is happening at school or [even school itself](#).

Dr. Anderson adds that if a child is on the [autism spectrum](#), mornings might be tougher because of a rigid adherence to rituals. If his parent needs him to be flexible and do the tasks out of order, that could lead to a lot of conflict.

Also, many kids have [difficulty with transitions](#), whether they have diagnoses like *ADHD*

and autism or not, and the morning is all about transitions done under a hard and fast deadline.

While parents can be more flexible about things like bedtime—perhaps they’ll let a child stay up reading until he falls asleep—morning doesn’t afford the same luxury.

If a child leaves the house in the morning without the right shoes, or sports gear, or homework, or without eating breakfast, it can contribute to problems during school.

And if a child ends up being late to school, the parent is often late to work, too.

So what's a parent to do to both get out the door on time and with as little conflict as possible? Dr. Anderson recommends several things.

Plan ahead

First, regardless of a child's age, think about what can be done the night before such as making lunches, taking showers, organizing backpacks, and laying out clothes. Talk with your kids as to what needs to get done in the morning. "It's great to have these discussions when cooler heads are prevailing and we can really problem solve about how to get things done in an efficient way," Dr. Anderson says.

Parents of younger kids need to focus on being clear about what needs to get done, helping them develop this list into good habits. This can be accomplished by noticing when a child is successful, then [praising him for those successes](#). It's also helpful to [break tasks down into very small steps](#) and then noting how well the child is trying to comply or do things independently.

Those with older kids could help them develop an [organizational plan](#)—a list they could check back on to make sure each step is completed. "We're all more effective when we're very clear with ourselves about what steps we might need to take and realistic about what we actually have time to get done," he says.

Temper expectations

Dr. Anderson also says it's a good idea for parents to prioritize the essential steps—what must get done—vs. the "icing on the cake" steps, at least at first.

Exactly what is essential? "The reality is often that the child at least has all of his clothes on, has something in his stomach, and has brushed his teeth," he says. "If we can get those three things done somehow, either before the child leaves or on the way to school, and reinforce the child's progress, then we can start to build those habits and make it so that mornings are easier in the future."

Once the essential steps become habit, parents can focus on the "icing," which can include things like a child keeping his hands to himself around a sibling, making his bed and organizing his things.

Use visual prompts

Dr. Anderson says that especially for younger kids who are on the autism spectrum or have ADHD, "we absolutely want to make it so that any behaviors we've defined as target behaviors are also prompted visually so that they can remember and, over time, start to independently do them." Visual prompts might include posted schedules and photos of targeted behaviors, such as a picture of a child brushing her teeth near the sink.

With typically developing children and teens, the amount of visualization needed varies: "There are kids who only need their parents to give instructions verbally and then they can usually remember them and follow through. Certain kids need either more reminders or time to form these habits," notes Dr. Anderson.

Create incentives

When it comes to making mornings better, rewards are also key. They can be either short term, involving some kind of immediate treat or, because of the time crunch, earned privileges to be enjoyed later.

Dr. Anderson offers one of his favorite examples of a short-term reward, involving a teenager and her mother. “They talked about what specific behaviors they were going to focus on,” he says. “The idea was she gets up by a certain time, gets all of her things together and leaves by a certain time for school. If those three things happened without too many prompts, then they would stop for a special breakfast like Starbucks and walk rather than take the subway.” Not only did this motivate the teen, it improved the mother-daughter relationship, since they had more time to talk.

Younger kids can be motivated by a more defined behavioral plan with meaningful rewards. Dr. Anderson cites the example of a fourth grader: As long as he gets up, eats a breakfast from among a few healthy choices, gets dressed quickly, and brushes his teeth without too many parental prompts, he earns points for each of those behaviors. These points translate into 30 minutes of screen time that evening.

Stay calm

When parents hit bumps in the road and [tempers are flaring](#), they need to think about ways to deescalate the situation, since arguing is a distraction and can damage their relationship with their kids, as well as slow things down even more. There are several ways parents can try to deescalate a situation, such as:

- [Speaking in a calm tone](#)
- Being clear about expectations
- Continuing to praise even small efforts rather than focusing on what the child might not be doing
- Focusing on the next step in the process
- Keeping one’s eye on the prize, both in the short and long terms.

It also helps to accept that in least in the short term, things might not be perfect but that by sticking to behavioral strategies, they can improve.

If all else fails, seek professional help.

In situations where kids have difficulty “even getting out of bed or where there’s conflict every morning with screaming fights,” to the point that family function is impaired or there are mental health concerns for either child or parent, Dr. Anderson recommends professional counseling. This could involve behavioral [parent training](#), where caregivers learn to use effective behavior management strategies; coaching the parent and child together for more successful interactions; or working individually with the child [on cognitive](#)

[behavioral therapy](#) to build coping skills and better [emotion regulation](#).

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