

## Routines Age 4 Summary

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### Why Routines?

As a parent or someone in a parenting role, you play a vital role in your child's success. There are intentional ways to grow a healthy parent-child relationship, and daily routines provide an excellent opportunity.

**STEP 1**  **GET INPUT**

### Get Your Child Thinking by Getting Their Input

- Consider your routines throughout the day—morning, midday, and bedtime. Creating routines around wake-up time, mealtime, naptime, bedtime, trips back and forth to child care, checking the mailbox, and going to the grocery store can make these times predictable, comforting, and fun for your child. Involve your child in creating routines around these common times by asking questions.
  - If your nighttime routine includes bathing your child, brushing their teeth, reading a bedtime story, and singing a lullaby every night before bed, you could ask your child: “Would you like to brush your teeth before or after your bath?” “What song would you like me to sing before you fall asleep?”
  - When coming into your home, for example, you might always take off your shoes near the front door. Your child will watch you and may start doing the same thing. They might firmly object if you decide to leave your shoes on one day. Involve your child in this routine by offering choices like “Would you like to put your shoes on the mat next to the door or in the basket?”
- Each time there is an opportunity, ask your child, “What do you notice? How do you feel?” If your child is unsure how to describe their feelings when a routine changes, consider asking questions, naming what you notice, and leaving plenty of quiet space after your questions so they can share their ideas.
  - “How did you feel when I told you we would do something different today?”
  - “I noticed you brought your book to grandma’s house so we could still do that part of our bedtime routine.”
  - “I noticed you felt better when you saw that grandma has the same kind of night light that we do.”
  - “How do you feel right now?”
- When reading books, point out routines that seem comforting and moments when those routines changed. Ask, “How do you think that character is feeling? What happened when his day changed?”

**Tip:** Your child will give you many cues about whether the routines you develop feel too complicated or too simple and if they are followed consistently enough for your child to feel secure. Every child is different, and your child may change daily depending on how willing they are to follow a routine or how much help they need to manage planned and unplanned routine changes.

## STEP 2 Teach New Skills

- Teach your child how to perform the routine. If there are new responsibilities or challenges, be sure you've tried those steps together first.
- Make your thinking and feelings explicit. Talk about what you notice, how you are feeling, and why you are feeling it. "I love that we always read stories before going to bed. It is one of my favorite times of the day because I get to spend time with you."
- Talk aloud about how you respond to your big feelings: "It made me feel so much better to tell you how I was feeling and to ask for help."
- Grow confidence. In addition to having consistent daily routines with your child, point out when they are following the routine on their own and when they can manage changes in the routine. "I noticed that you knew to get the bedtime story while I was getting out the toothbrush and toothpaste. You knew what to expect next and were ready for it." When something is different, you might say, "I noticed you knew we left our usual bedtime story at the neighbor's house, and you just picked up a different one. You did not look worried at all about trying something new. You knew how to handle that change, which was not a big deal."
- If your child is worried about a change in routine and uses definitive language like, "We always read the other book," you may respond with:
  - "This is something different from our usual routine, and I know we can do it."
  - "Do you remember last time we didn't have your favorite pajamas, and you had to wear something different to bed? You seemed disappointed initially, but then you took a deep breath and could do it."
  - "I wonder if we can do something to help us overcome this challenge?"

## STEP 3 Practice to Grow Skills and Develop Habits

- Learn about your child's development. Each new age presents different challenges, and being informed about your child's developmental milestones promotes empathy and patience.
- Engage in routines together, like picking up toys before snacktime or putting away your shoes when you come inside. Offer active support to engage in routines so your child can be successful.

- Initially, practice may require more teaching, but avoid taking over and doing it for your child.
- Once your routines feel comfortable and consistent, provide opportunities for your child to change the routine. “I’ve noticed you enjoy story time at the library on Tuesdays. We have enough time to check out some books after storytime this week. Do you think we should find two books we would like to check out and take home?” The goal is to feel a sense of security from being able to predict what happens each day and to feel comfortable with change.
- Use your child’s dolls or stuffed animals to act out your routine, especially if it is new or changing. This is an excellent way to practice mastering the steps of the routine. If you know a change is coming up; you can act out that change with dolls and stuffed animals so your child can experience what that change will feel like. For example, if a cousin is visiting and doing the routines with you, you can act out that change with dolls and stuffed animals. “What will happen when your cousin comes to visit? I wonder if his routine is different. Maybe we could ask him what his routine is like.”
- If part of a routine is not working, talk with your child about ways to change your plan for it to work better. “It seems to take a long time for you to decide which books to read for bedtime. I usually feel tired then, and it is hard to be patient while you choose. Is there something we can do to help you choose the books more quickly? Could we choose them in the morning? What do you think we should try tonight?”



## Support Your Child’s Development and Success

- Use “Show me...” statements with a positive tone and body language to express excitement and curiosity. Ask them to demonstrate how they can work through a routine with you. “Show me the next step when we get ready for lunchtime.” Offer support so your child can be successful.
- Don’t move on quickly if your child shows interest in trying something new. Children often need more time to stick with a challenge or pursue a goal. Be sure to wait long enough for your child to show you they are competent. Your waiting could make all the difference in whether they can gain skills over time.
- Recognize effort using “I notice...” statements like: “I noticed how you got your toothbrush out of the drawer as part of our morning routine. I love seeing that.”
- Routines can feel incredibly comforting on days with extra challenges. When the house is full of visitors, and there are many changes in your regular routine, offer to let your child teach everyone your good morning song or take a walk around the neighborhood using the same path you usually use. This will help your child feel confident in their ability to teach others their routine, and they will feel less stressed because they will know what to expect.
- Actively reflect on how your child feels when they have mastered a routine or are facing a change. You can offer reflections like:
  - “I see you have the breakfast spoons ready. You know exactly what to expect next.” Naming their success will help to grow confidence.

- “Taking this bus to the store feels different than the one we usually take. There are different signs on the walls and new things to notice. Let’s look at them together.” Noticing your child’s concerns and developing strategies for facing them will help your child know that you are there to help them get through this change.



## Recognize Efforts

- Recognize and call out when things are going well. It may seem obvious, but it's easy not to notice when everything moves smoothly. Noticing and naming the behavior provides the necessary reinforcement that you see and value your child's choice.
- Recognize small steps along the way. Don't wait for significant accomplishments—like the full bedtime routine going smoothly—to recognize effort. Remember that your recognition can work as a tool to promote more positive behaviors. Find small ways your child is making an effort and let them know you see them.
- Build celebrations into your routine. For example, snuggle and read before bed after getting through your bedtime routine.

**Trap:** It can be easy to resort to bribes when recognition and occasional rewards are underutilized. If parents or those in a parenting role frequently resort to bribes, it is likely time to revisit the five-step process.

**Trap:** Think about what behavior a bribe may unintentionally reinforce. For example, offering a sucker if a child stops a tantrum in the grocery store checkout line may teach the child that future tantrums lead to additional treats.

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