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Getting Your Kids Up and Out in the Morning

Close to the top of the list for greatest daily behavioral hassles is the problem of getting the kids up and out of the house in the morning. The situation often brings out the worst in everybody. Many people—both parents and kids—are naturally crabby in the morning and there is the additional pressure of having to get someplace on time. The nervousness, nagging and emotional thunderstorms that result can easily ruin everyone's day.

For the kids, getting up and out in the morning involves a whole sequence of positive behaviors: out of bed on time, washing up, brushing teeth, making the bed, eating breakfast and leaving the house. What is required varies some from family to family, but it's basically the same job.

For the Little Ones

With most kids ages two to four, you'll have to help them get ready and supervise them closely. They just can't sustain the activity for that long. Use a lot of praise and positive reinforcement during the process.

For other children up to about age nine, using charting plus a kitchen timer can be very helpful. Stickers can be used on the chart (or numbers if the child prefers). The child's favorite sticker may be the reward for a super job of getting ready, and her next most favorite sticker for a good job. No sticker at all means "You blew it—better luck tomorrow."

If you are using a timer, the best sticker can be given for getting ready in a certain amount of time. Remember that doing well involves not only completing the required activities of washing and dressing, but also doing them as much as possible by oneself and without complaining. A lot of parents find that not letting the kids watch TV until the youngsters are totally ready to walk out the door is a good idea. Some children also can't eat breakfast until they're ready to go, though you generally don't want to send kids off to school hungry.

Up and Out for Older Kids

For nine-year-olds and up, the program involves some semi-drastic alterations in the morning routine, which often shock the kids into changing.

First of all, it is important to realize that most of these kids want to go to school and/or they would be embarrassed if they didn't show up or were late. So if they dilly-dally around in the morning, they are going to have some trouble with someone in the car pool, or with the principal or with teachers at school. Most kids don't want these kinds of hassles, so we use the threat of these natural consequences to help shape them up.

Here's how it works. You explain to the kids that from now on it will be their job to get themselves up and out in the morning. You will neither supervise them nor nag. You can help put out clothes for

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them the night before, if necessary. If you have been waking them up, go out and buy an alarm clock and show them how to use it.

You make it clear to the kids that getting up, getting dressed, washing up, eating breakfast, and leaving on time will be their job. If you wish, you can chart the kids on how well they do, but you cannot say anything to them while they are getting ready, other than casual conversation.



For the first few days many parents can't stand watching this procedure—it drives them crazy to see the kids fooling around at a late hour. So we ask these parents to take their coffee and retire to the bedroom, so they don't have to witness the impending disaster.

Breakfast is optional. You can put food out if that's your usual routine, but you can't remind the kids to eat it. Or the children can just get their own if they want. Most children won't die from missing breakfast. When the kids leave, you say nothing about coats, hats or gloves, unless there is danger of frostbite.

What you are doing is teaching the kids some independence and invoking a sacred rule of psychology: Sometimes Learning the Hard Way is the Best Way to Learn. The lessons sink in more when kids get burned a few times than they do when the little ones simply listen to a lecture. So you have to be willing to let the kids get burned.

What does "getting burned" mean? It means being late to school a few times, being embarrassed and having to explain to the principal or teacher what happened. It means suddenly realizing at 7:50 that you're not dressed and that Mom didn't remind you that your car pool ride or bus was coming at 8:00. It means getting to school and realizing you forgot your math book at home because you left in too big of a hurry. It means blowing your stack at your mother or father a few times because your parents were not nagging you anymore to get ready on time, or because they refused to write you an excuse note.

These experiences have quite an impact on most kids. If parents are consistent, don't talk and let the kids get burned, the children will shape up in a few days. Then things will be much more peaceful at home in the morning and the kids will be much more responsible.

By the way, kids have four main ways of getting to school: car pool, bus, walking or riding bikes. When you are within walking distance of the school, this up-and-out program is the easiest. With car pools or bus, you may have to drive the kids if they don't make their connection. For most kids this isn't a problem—they won't get dependent on you driving all the time, especially if they're late. Remember not to lecture them on the way to school if you do have to drive them.

Saying nothing is critical. Let the experience talk to your child—not you!

Skeptical?

If you are skeptical, try it out and see what happens. Most kids—not all, but most—will respond well. The most important rules are to keep quiet, stay out of it, and be willing to let your kids get burned—more than once. If necessary, let the school know what you are doing. Most teachers and principals will cooperate with you, especially if you explain your purpose and label the procedure "independence training."

Quick Tip: Are You Reinforcing Misbehavior?

If you have a child who is doing something you don't like, get real upset about it on a regular basis and, sure enough, he'll repeat it for you.

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