



# Starting the Day Off Right: Making the Most of Morning Routines

Adapted November 2018 by Victoria McMullen for Home & Community PBS by Megan Joy, Marcie Handler, & Meme Hieneman, Parenting Special Needs Magazine, 2015 (Sep/Oct), pp. 24-26.

We start each day with two simple words, “Good morning”, in the hope of encouraging a positive start to the day. Yet, in just minutes, the morning becomes consumed by the necessary tasks - dressing, eating, gathering supplies, and so on. There is SO MUCH to accomplish to get out of the house on time. Mornings can be especially challenging for persons with disabilities since their level of independence may be limited. When given multiple directions at once, they may have difficulty complying quickly or consistently, even with tasks they do every day.

Consider also that people may be tired, hungry, feeling ill, or otherwise be out-of-sorts while the morning tasks need to be accomplished. Caregivers/staff may be trying to guide the people they support through routines and teach them new skills while other issues affecting their behavior may be in play. Here are some tips for improving morning routines.

## ***Decide What Needs to Be Accomplished***

The first step to improving morning routines is to identify goals and establish expectations. Is there a specific time the person must be ready to leave? What will the person need to have completed? What materials must the person take along to have a successful day? What will happen if the person meets or does not meet these goals? Scripting out the morning routine and then sharing those expectations with the person and the

caregivers/staff can be very helpful. The second step is to analyze the typical morning routine and identify patterns. What happens when the morning routine goes well? What happens when the morning routine falls apart? Identifying these patterns will help highlight what is working and indicate around which challenges problem-solving must occur.

## ***Be Proactive and Prevent Problems***

Simply put, the more that is prepared ahead of time, the more problems are prevented and the greater opportunities there are for people to develop independent skills. Here are some possible strategies: Develop a routine for the morning. Write down all the necessary steps in the order needed to occur for the morning routine (e.g., get dressed, make bed, have breakfast, brush teeth, collect belongings). Provide picture or written checklists as appropriate. Allow plenty of time, so that rushing doesn't trigger problem behavior. Plan for brief breaks. Encourage independence, but provide back-up support when needed. Be ready to use calming and coping strategies such as taking deep breaths or creating a “plan B” when things do not go as planned.

A useful strategy for improving morning routines is to create a social story that describes what will happen and what the person is expected to do. On the following page is an example.

## **Encourage Positive, Not Problem, Behavior**

To encourage effort and persistence throughout the morning, praise a person for attempting a new skill (“good start”), becoming increasingly independent (“you are close to doing that all by yourself”), and then accomplishing the entire morning routine (“you did it without reminders today!”). For people with disabilities, the feedback may need to be more frequent (especially initially) and specific to the activity, but still age-appropriate (e.g., “we’ve got our coats, we’re out of here!”). Make activities fun! For example, set goals to “beat the clock”, using a visual timer as tasks are completed. Provide small rewards for successful completion of morning routines, if needed. Make the last step of the morning routine a preferred activity. For example, “on-time departure” means we have a few extra minutes to use an electronic device, have a cup of coffee, or watch a few minutes of television. Consider providing the reward in the car or at the destination if transitions are problematic. Add rewards for increasing success over time. For example, if the routines are completed on time 5 mornings in a row, provide a special breakfast from the drive-thru on Fridays.

## **Final Thoughts on Morning Routines**

Morning routines do, in fact, become easier when they become “routine”. Just as breakfast is seen as the most important meal of the day, success in navigating the morning routine can be a predictor of how the rest of the day transpires for all people. Using these strategies, we can create successes and minimize challenges – and if mornings do not go as planned, we always have the next day.

## **Social Story for Morning Routine**

*When my alarm rings in the morning, it is time for me to get up and start my day.*

*I may feel tired, but I will shake it off. If I need a minute, I can say I need a quick stretch.*

*I will get out of bed and get dressed, putting on the clothes I chose the night before.*

*I will come to the dining room and eat my breakfast. I will eat healthy food so I have the energy I need for my day.*

*Next, it will be time to brush my teeth. I will set the timer and brush for one full minute, making sure my teeth are clean.*

*I will then grab my bag, which will have everything I need.*

*Finally, I will get in the car and belt myself in to start my day’s adventure.*

