



# Tips for Building Structure

## WHAT TO KNOW

- Structure is created by consistency, predictability, and follow-through.
- Routines teach children what to expect throughout the day.

## Overview

It's normal for young children to test the limits. That's how they learn what is right and wrong. But, it can be frustrating and really test our patience as parents! One way to keep control and help children learn is to create structure. Structure is created by consistent routines and rules. Rules teach children what behaviors are okay and not okay. Routines teach children what to expect throughout the day.

Three key ingredients to building structure in the home are **consistency**, **predictability**, and **follow-through**.

## Use consistency, predictability, and follow-through

**Consistency** means that you respond to your child's behavior the same way every time no matter what is going on or how you're feeling. Misbehaviors are less likely to occur again if you always use the same consequence, like ignoring or time-out. Good behaviors are likely to be repeated if you let your child know you like them. This doesn't mean that you need to give consistent attention to ALL of your child's behaviors. Think about something you want your child to do more often. This could be sharing, cleaning up, or following directions. To increase those behaviors, praise the behaviors each time you see them occur. Your consistent response will help those behaviors happen more often.



### Examples

Example 1: You use time-out at home and at the grocery store every time your child hits their sister. You do this even when you are tired from a stressful day at work.

Example 2: You praise your child each time they share with a new friend while playing. You do this even if you are busy with something else and need to make a special effort to praise them.

**Predictability** means your child knows what will happen and how you will respond. When your daily routines are predictable, your child knows what to expect for the day. When your rules are predictable, your child knows how you will react to their behavior.



### Examples

Example 1: Your child knows that if they hit a friend while playing, they will go to time-out every time.

Example 2: Your child knows certain steps are followed each night at bedtime, such as taking a bath, brushing teeth, reading a story, getting into bed, and turning off the lights.

**Following through** means that you do what you say you will do in response to your child's behaviors. This is often called the "say what you mean and mean what you say." If you tell your child a behavior will have consequences, you give the consequence every time it happens. If you tell your child they will be rewarded for a behavior, you give them the reward after they have done what you asked. To be consistent and predictable, we need to follow through. Follow-through is important for ALL behaviors. This includes behaviors we like and don't like.



### Examples

Example 1: Your child does not follow your direction, and you give a warning that they will lose playtime if they doesn't follow your direction. Your child still doesn't do what you directed. They lose playtime.

Example 2: If you promise your child a treat for staying in the shopping cart in the grocery store, your child knows they will get a treat from the candy or toy machine on the way out of the store.

## Why structure is important

A structure that helps your child learn to behave has routines and rules that are consistent, predictable, and have follow through. There is a basic routine you follow and rules you live by on most days of the week. You set appropriate expectations and limits for your child's behaviors. Your child learns how you are going to respond to behaviors that are okay or not okay.

Structure helps parents and their kids. Kids feel safe and secure because they know what to expect. Parents feel confident because they know how to respond, and they respond the same way each time. Routines and rules help structure the home and make life more predictable.

Creating structure at any age can help your child and you. Children can begin learning routines and rules at a very young age. You can begin with routines for important activities of the day, like meals, bedtime, or in the morning.

## Examples of family routines

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### Family with a three-year-old

#### Daily schedule

- 6:30 a.m.: Wake up and get out of bed.
- 6:50 a.m.: Get dressed, brush teeth, and leave for daycare.
- 7:00 a.m.: Eat breakfast or a snack in the car.
- 4:00 p.m.: Pick up from daycare.
- 4:30 – 5:30 p.m.: Playtime while parents prepare dinner.
- 5:45 p.m.: Eat dinner.
- 6:30 p.m.: Bath time and brush teeth.
- 7:00 p.m.: Read or play a game together.
- 8:00 p.m.: Bedtime.

### Family with two kids, a two-year-old and four-year-old

#### Preschool days

- 7:30 – 8:00 a.m.: Get kids out of bed.
- 8:00 a.m.: Eat breakfast – no screen time.
- 8:15 a.m.: Get kids dressed for preschool, brush teeth and hair, and play until 8:35 a.m.
- 8:40 a.m.: Leave house for preschool.
- 12:00 p.m.: Pick up kids from preschool.
- 12:30 p.m.: Lunch and a book before nap.
- 1:00 p.m.: Nap time (plan the afternoon during this time including starting dinner).
- 3:30 – 4:00 p.m.: Get up from nap and have a snack.
- 4:00 – 5:15 p.m.: Play.
- 5:30 p.m.: Watch a television show while parents prepare dinner.
- 6:00 – 6:15 p.m.: Eat dinner.
- 6:30 p.m.: Bath time, brush teeth, and get pajamas on.
- 7:00 p.m.: Do something fun together letting children lead.

- 7:15 p.m.: Book and cuddle time.
- 7:30 p.m.: Bedtime.

### Non-preschool days:

- 8:00 a.m.: Get kids out of bed.
- 8:30 a.m.: Eat breakfast.
- 9:00 – 10:00 a.m.: Kids play inside or watch television while parents get ready for the day.
- 10:15 a.m.: Get kids dressed and ready for any activities for the day.
- 10:30 a.m.: Snack on the way to activity.
- 10:30 a.m.– 12:15 p.m.: Activity.
- 12:30 p.m.: Lunch.
- 1:00 p.m.: Naptime
- 3:30 – 4:00 p.m.: Get up from nap and have a snack.
- 4:00 – 5:15 p.m.: Play.
- 5:30 p.m.: Watch a television show while parents prepare dinner.
- 6:00 – 6:15 p.m.: Eat dinner.
- 6:30 p.m.: Bath time, brush teeth, and get pajamas on.
- 7:00 p.m.: Do something fun together letting children lead.
- 7:15 p.m.: Book and cuddle time.
- 7:30 p.m.: Bedtime.

## Resources

Watch videos and practice your skills for creating structure and rules by visiting [Practice Parenting Skills: Structure and Rules](#).

### SOURCES

#### CONTENT SOURCE:

[National Center for Injury Prevention and Control](#)