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November 2005 - Morning Struggles and the Frazzled Parent

Contribution by Beverley Cathcart-Ross, parent educator, founder of The Parenting Network and a speaker on the Toronto Parents At Work roster.

"Daniel, what have you been doing up here? You are supposed to be getting dressed – we are going to be late again!" "I am looking for a piece to my Lego", Daniel mumbles. "I can't believe this. Your brother is better organized than you are and he's 2 years younger! Now put that down and get moving." "Relax mom, I'm dressed aren't I?" "Don't get smart with me, and you aren't dressed until your shirt's done up and your socks are on! And, you haven't even brushed your teeth or your hair." Mom left the room in a rage and yelled, "If you aren't down stairs in 5 minutes I'm leaving without you. I'm fed up with this!"

Like many parents this mother feels like she's put in a full day's work by 8:15 AM ! Her morning is consumed with nagging, reminding and taking away privileges – threats that she needs to remember (and often regrets) later! She tried establishing routines in the morning and it worked for a day or two and then it all fell apart.

What Gets in the Way?

The Slippery Slope

You know how important it is for your children to become independent, self-reliant, and competent, but then they dawdle and you lose your mind.

So you fall into the pattern of doing for them (because it's faster and easier), making demands of them (because nothing would happen otherwise), and threatening to take away privileges (because... nothing would happen otherwise). You say to yourself, I will work on independence tomorrow.

Well, that is the slippery slope, and this is your wake up call

– you need to get started on those skills today.

The Fallacy of Protection

Like most parents you probably get caught up in short-term thinking. “If I can just get them through breakfast without a struggle then we might get out of the house on time today.” You rationalize that if you have to nag your son a bit to get his homework done at least he will do better in school. Or if you keep reminding your daughter of the time she won’t miss breakfast or be late.

You want the best for your children and don’t want to see them struggle. But parents today over protect and over serve their children more than any previous generation. The results? It keeps children dependent, gives them a sense of entitlement and no sense of responsibility.

A Lack of Knowledge

Putting aside the fact that we all have very busy lives, most parents simply lack the knowledge of where to start. Because it is recognized that parenting today is more of a challenge, there are many books, courses and services now available to give you the guidance you may need. The first step is to become aware of the alternatives, initiate change and be prepared for that learning curve. There are always ups and downs, so best to see it as a process that will lead you to more harmony and order in your family.

Establish Morning Routines Together

Children do best when they have some structure and are partners in the flow of family life. For routines to be effective it is wise to include the child in the planning process – it is also a sign of respect. If your child has a voice and say they are more likely to be cooperative.

A great place to start is with a problem-solving meeting – let’s look at how Daniel and his mom could approach their morning struggles more effectively. (If your child is under 3 years of age give them a few choices instead.)

- **Calm Time:** Mom is best to present the issue at a calm time – not at 8:00 AM when Daniel is terrorizing his younger sister.

“Daniel, we’ve been having some bad mornings lately and I’d really like your help in finding a way to make them work better.” (Note the respectful, non-blameful tone)

- **See It From Your Child’s Point of View:** Acknowledge

your children's position first. (It's important for them to believe you are understanding and caring of their point of view – whether you agree with it or not!)

"Daniel could it be that you don't like my reminding, and you feel I am on your case every morning. Is that how you see it?"

Give the child a chance to elaborate on the injustice of it all and listen without comment (The occasional "Mmm" or "I see" can be a help!). Then summarize what you've heard him say.

"So you feel that I nag you and not the others, and that you should be able to have some play time in the morning. Is that correct? Anything else?" (Always good to give them another shot at voicing their opinion now that the wheels are in motion!)

- Share Your Point of View: Best to keep this brief - you don't want to lose your audience! Get to the heart of how you feel (in 10 words or less): "I love you too much to fight every morning." Or "I want us to start our day on a happy note."
- Brainstorm: Daniel and his mom can suggest ideas – even crazy ones. At this stage all ideas are accepted, it isn't a time to evaluate - you want to keep the process positive. I suggest you jot your ideas down.
- Picking a Solution: Time to sort through. The goal is to agree on a solution that's mutually satisfactory (sometimes the process of elimination is a good place to begin). Write down the revised routine and agree to test it out for a few mornings to see if it works for everyone. Book a follow up meeting to evaluate the effectiveness of your new routine – this is key to the success of these sorts of agreements. If it's working, congratulate yourselves; if it isn't, go back to the drawing board.

Ideas in case you get stuck!

- Job Description: Have the child list the things that they need to do in the morning (get up, dress, eat breakfast, brush hair and teeth, get backpack organized and leave at a certain time). Do the same for yourself – this is a great time to announce you quit your job as nag/reminder.
- Come to an agreement on the order the child's tasks will be done – remember to find 15 minutes for that playtime Daniel wants!

- Decide together the role the parent is to play in the child's routine (include the number of reminders!) – i.e. Mom gives me a hug first thing, makes breakfast, calls once for breakfast, gives a "5 minutes to leaving time" warning. Agree to stop all other reminding and nagging.
- Find creative alternatives to help the child be independent, such as alarm clocks, timers, and charts. The kids in one family took pictures of each other doing their teeth, eating breakfast, etc. and made personal photo charts.
- Consider doing tasks the night before – my son decided to get dressed for school the night before – worked like a charm for a few months!

Follow Through: A most critical step!

Now that the easy part is done, the plan, the tough part begins. Following through. Let your child know your limits – that's right you set limits for you – the only person you are really in control of! For example, "I can help you with braiding your hair before 8:00 AM but not after", "I am willing to help with homework the night before but not at breakfast" "I am willing to drive you to school, but I am not willing to be late".

Now drop your standards a bit and see the morning as a success if you make any progress. If your goal was to get in the car by 8:15 AM without raising your voice once and you achieve this, celebrate! Yes, there may be a child in the car that missed breakfast and another racing out of the house putting clothes on as they go, but it is progress none-the-less. Do the unexpected by congratulating the kids for their effort instead of your usual lectures all the way to school. Let them know tomorrow will be another chance to get things better. Our goal is improvement, not perfection!

Lastly, as uncomfortable as this can be - don't interfere with natural consequences. If your children are going to learn to master their responsibilities, let them experience the results of their own choices. Not dressing warmly enough, a forgotten lunch, even a missed day of school are all great opportunities for your child to develop their judgment. Much of life learning is through trial and error – so don't protect them from it!

Taking time for training is an investment, up front. But like any good investment the long-term pay out makes it all worthwhile. So be forewarned that children usually get worse before they get better. See it as a good sign. They could be resisting the change; the responsibility; or they

could be testing whether they can get you back into their service - all important reasons to stay with the program.
Good luck!