Chapter 11: Navigating the Morning Madness

Recipe rescue: ideas to organise your way through a better morning routine

The scenario...

"What about my toast?"

It's just hit 8:05am and eleven year old Justin isn't ready to leave. He's only just pulled on his school pants. Despite the fact that everyone has to be in the car by 8:10am, he's in 'Justin's world', dawdling aimlessly about with one shoe in hand. Who knows where the other one is? Justin doesn't!

As usual, Justin's been slow to move even though everyone has places to be and the pressure to get ready is on. Gillian has been into his room six times - to get him out of bed, prize him away from sitting on his bed staring at the floor, to insist that he takes his pyjamas off, help him take his pyjamas off, to take away his iPod touch and later to turn off the television in his room. She'll never forgive herself for agreeing to have a TV in his room - her worst decision ever and a decision that costs her every day!

"Justin, have you had breakfast or packed your schoolbag yet?"

Gillian instantly knows the answer to both questions as she spies his lunch box and breakfast still sitting on the kitchen counter with his homework book from last night.

"Justin, move it! Get your shoes on and pack your bag. You can eat a piece of toast in the car." Gillian throws a slice of bread into the toaster.

"I can't find my other shoe," whines Justin.

"Look under your bed," Gillian calls through gritted teeth.

Justin wanders toward his bedroom while Chelsea, his eight year old sister stands in the hallway, bag over her shoulder and ready to go.

Justin arrives back in the kitchen with both shoes. Thank goodness for small mercies Gillian thinks. She throws his lunch box into his school bag, along with his homework book and heads for the door.

"What about my toast?" calls Justin. It's now 8:20am. The kids will be late for school. Gillian will be late for her team meeting and she's about ready to pop.

"Just get in the car! Both of you! Now!" she growls at the kids.

"Don't blame me for him being slow, Mum," says Chelsea as Gillian runs back into the house to retrieve the toast for Justin.

Organisation - first, identify the root of the difficulty

Where does your child's inept organisation stem from? Is it because you're disorganised and you've not taught them how to be organised? Is it due to their poor personal capacity or is it all about opposing you and trying to sabotage routines you try to put in place?

Some children and teens are genuinely organisationally challenged. It is a brain based difficulty where they really do have trouble remembering tasks, keeping focus - especially the ones we ask them to do - and completing everyday jobs. Parents often say, "they live in their own world" or "in a fog". Their lives are fractured by lost belongings, forgotten schoolwork, lost homework, poor planning, poor time management and daily vagueness. Frequently, their untidy appearance or messy bedroom gives us a glimpse into their disorganised/ disorderly thinking. While organisational challenges actually pervade most parts of their lives, the morning routine and its constraints on time, is when these invisible developmental flaws are most noticeable.

For some, memory and organisational weaknesses are linked to a specific learning difficulty. We know that children and teens diagnosed with ADD and ADHD suffer badly from time 'blindness' and poor task completion. In fact, they may be delayed by up to 40% compared to others the same age, despite average or well above average intelligence. Children with developmental immaturities, low motivation, auditory processing weaknesses, reduced listening capacities, and those experiencing depression, stress and anxiety can experience the same types of organisational deficits. Poorly organised kids lack the individual building blocks responsible for higher-order organisation. Without these primary components, they cannot look, feel or be well organised.

Does this help you form a better sense of the origin of your child's organisational problems? If so, you can see that independent organisation is a higher-order skill they haven't yet acquired, and the only way to support them is to gently and continuously coach them, as we set up consistent routines and structures.

Recipe rescue: ideas to organise your way through a better morning routine

Are your school mornings chaotic? Are your mornings a high-nag, high-anxiety war zone? Are you tired of the machine gun bursts of frantic instructions that spray from your mouth, but never seem to have much of an impact?

"I hurry up, get out of bed"; "Get dressed"; "Go to the toilet"; "Brush your teeth"; "Find your shoes"; "Put your shoes on"; "Pack your bag"; "For God's sake just straighten your bed". "Put the milk back in the fridge", "That's too much cereal", "Why have you opened that juice?", "Pack your homework into your bag"; "Nobody sits on the toilet for that long" while you scurry from location to location stamping out grass fires trying to get dressed and hang out a load of washing.

If some or all of this has a familiar ring to it, then this Recipe rescue is just what you need! It offers parents a blend of strategies that strike a balance between supporting kids and teens who have organisational difficulties, and those who have been allowed to fall into poor morning habits.
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First, organise yourself!

Don’t underestimate the high-stress around busy school mornings. School mornings have to be the most demanding time of the day because there’s so much to do and a limited amount of time to do it. When we’re in a rush and under pressure, we don’t give clear directions to the kids. Instead, we bark out what needs to be done, and the tone is usually hurried, angry, or condescending. The most important ingredient to low-stress mornings comes from organising yourself first.

The best tip - get out of bed well before the kids. Get showered, dressed and ready before you start the kids off for the morning. By doing this, you’re free to actively work alongside your kids to help them develop and maintain the regular before school routine you wish to set in place. Smooth mornings don’t just happen! They are engineered - the result of forward thinking and cleverly arranged conditions.

Bear in mind that our brains, and our kids’ brains, take time to boot up after waking up - none of us have the same brainpower we’re likely to generate later in the day. Adolescents are still getting the work of this. Current brain research shows that teens’ brains aren’t properly booted up until mid-morning because they experience forward shifts in their sleep cycle by 1 to 2 hours. Apparently, the sleep-promoting hormone, melatonin, rises later in the day in teenagers than in kids and adults. That’s why most teens will say that they’re not tired, not ready to go to bed and can’t fall asleep in the evening. Consequently, teens are programmed to stay up later, fall asleep later and sleep longer. And, this is in its pure form - without the addictive influences of television, computers, video games or social media.

So given this, getting up earlier, and being a little more organised may be the very best strategy we have available to us. We dare you to try it! Come on! For one week, get yourself out of bed thirty minutes early and get yourself ready before it’s time for the kids to stir. If you’re not in a more settled state of mind and a step ahead of the kids we’ll happily share eating this book! We know that we’ll never risk eating our breakfast because ‘hungry’ turns into action when you’re behind the eight ball and pushed for time. When your planning puts you ahead of time, those few inevitable hiccups tend not to turn into cataclysmic disasters! Oh, and by the way, it models wonderful forward planning to the kids!

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Checksheets

Both of us, in our previous lives as teachers in classrooms, saw the dramatic difference between kids who’ve experienced chaotic mornings at home and those who’ve followed an anticipated before-school routine.

The contrast is striking! And, for kids facing learning difficulties, anxiety issues, social hitches or behavioural turbulence, the contrast is even starker. Children and young teens who arrive at school following typical morning mayhems can take most of the morning to come down from a high arousal state - hyperactive/hypervigilant - to a place where they begin to engage in learning and with peers. Add an empty stomach to this, and it’s obvious why these kids may go to school for the love of the food, and www.hansbergeyce.com.au (Bill). Once you’ve done this, laminate the checklist and have your children use them to keep track of the chores and assign a digital time for each; the chart always adds enthusiasm if you are very organised yourself and have your jobs done, you could start getting yourself close to the checklist and dispense the motivational goodie as the kids swing by to tick a job off! Oh, be sure to take it down when friends or extended family come over. Always safeguard your children’s dignity! Also, don’t forget Checkpad. It’s a clever little Token Reinforcement App for iPhones and iPads that we mentioned in the chapter, How to catch and build positive behaviours. It’s a wonderful way to keep track of before and after school chores and keeps kids interested!

How to make a morning routine

Timing is the key. Choose a time when the pressure is off. Family meetings work well for this type of planning. Otherwise, go for a lazy Sunday morning when no one has anywhere to be. Sit down as a family and talk about the things that need to get done to make school mornings easier. Chat with your kids about what happens when mornings work well and what happens when mornings get tough and stressful. Be sure to mention that you want to create mornings that work well! As you all chat, jot down the morning tasks that the kids mention. Avoid the temptation to add too many! A list of more than five tasks is too big for most kids, so stick to the basics and assign a digital time for each;

screens, free-time and the morning schedule

We subscribe to the idea that the faster the morning tasks are done, the longer the free-time the kids have available to them. So when you’re planning the new morning routine ask the kids what they’d like to do when they finish up early. Create an ingenuous list, and then display it so they can draw from it to reward themselves.

In our opinion, allowing children to access screens as they get ready in the morning is a dire mistake. Most kids are not able to self-regulate what they do when they have a screen in front of their face, or a controller in their hands - it’s natural for them to be totally absorbed by the screen. What you’ll get is most children ultra-slow motion, with their school shirt half buttoned, one shoe on (no souls) and eyes frozen on the screen, as if in a trance, even in the coldest of weather.

If you’re adamant that screens must be part of free-time, then we suggest you...
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put them last on the list of morning tasks. Let access to them be an incentive for completing morning tasks. We know some very clever parents who do just this, but the screens are not used at home. Instead, they hand the screens to their children to use in the car as they travel to school. Oh, if one of the kids turns a screen on while your back is turned, play it calmly and take possession of the device. Don’t go on and on about it, simply gather up remotes and important connecting cords with the understanding that they will be handed over when you choose.

A great morning routine starts with a good afternoon routine

Lots of morning hot spots can be eliminated by developing a planned afternoon routine which swings into action the moment the kids arrive home. Helping your children to embed some simple habits will save precious time the next morning:

Schoolbags

A messy schoolbag undermines any well-planned routine. We’ve all experienced a moment of panic as we discover something of consequence from school that should have been taken care of last week. It’s challenging for most kids to keep schoolbags well-organised and tenfold harder for those with organisational and attentional difficulties. There’s a simple rule here - never allow schoolbag untidiness to become an issue. Instead, once a week go through the school bag with your child. Start it up so that they take the leading role, and no doubt you’ll both be amazed by what you discover: notes, newsletters, library books, lunch bags, toys, collector cards and food that has accumulated at the bottom of the bag. But, beyond this is the development of a practical habit and the feeling that they can begin the new week knowing exactly what’s in the bag.

Finally, if you think this approach is only suitable for young children, you couldn’t be more wrong. This is an approach we consistently use in our work with motivated, but disorganised students in the upper years of high school. Carried out with respect, it works beautifully!

Are you a homework resourcer?

Stop it! You’re not doing any of your kids a favour - in fact, you’re damaging their organisational difficulty. Your actions may be inspired by love, but what you’re doing is misguided. Sit down with the kids and tell them that you will no longer be available for homework rescue at the eleventh hour, in the mornings or evenings. Explain that from now on if they have unfinished homework, they can wake up early and use their free-time to do it, but you will not be available to help.

In contrast, make it perfectly clear that you’ll always be available to support homework when it’s part of a longer-term planned, organised approach. Whatever their age, now is the time to let them live with the consequences of unfinished homework, and failure to listen and follow basic requests. For some of you who will have an uphill battle ahead, we suggest that you let your child’s teacher know you’ve made this the policy at home. Most teachers will appreciate this. Some will even open up and let students complete their homework before classes begin in the morning, but don’t necessarily expect this.

Eating breakfast

As parents, we’re constantly bombarded by the media, food gurus, breakfast food companies and our kids about what’s best for breakfast. Sadly, many of our kids’ top choices are nutritionally poor and loaded with staggering amounts of sugar, fat, preservatives and colourings. What you decide to feed your kids outside the scope of this book, but one thing is for sure - what you feed them will influence their mood, concentration, cooperation, social responsiveness, enthusiasm, memory, desire to follow instructions, learning capacities, and will gradually impact on their future.

Pancakes, toast, croissants, fruit juices and many cereals and mueslis are not ideal breakfast foods, but something is a bit better than nothing. Nutritious sources of breakfast protein include milk, cheese, yoghurt, baked beans, soy products, nuts, white meat and eggs. Other good choices include whole grains and fruits. The experts tell us that by mixing these foods, the body is fuelled for longer because blood sugar levels remain higher for much longer. These foods are said to have a low GI index.

If your child baulks at eating breakfast, try not to turn your worry into a battle. This rubs against the principle of assisting kids to be more responsible for their choices. Negotiate something they will eat and drink, even if it is in small quantities, and pack extra food in their lunch box for them to nibble later. Take them shopping to choose breakfasts that are acceptable to both of you. Having chosen their breakfast foods themselves may help strengthen their promise to eat in the morning and make breakfasts a little easier.

It may seem a little extreme, but consider getting the kids to set their place at the table the night before. It’s a great idea because psychologically it cues children into a predictable start. They know exactly what they are going to eat and drink for breakfast, and have it ready to go.

And, as tough as it may sound, kids of all ages do better at the breakfast table when a parent is nearby or sitting with them. It’s just a fact of life!

Cuesing systems to go!

Countdown till leaving time

"The car leaves in 30 minutes." "The car leaves in 20 minutes." "The car leaves in 10 minutes." "The car leaves in 5 minutes." Get the idea? Kids don’t perceive the passing of time as we do, and because we’re often battling to make time we view it with way more reverence than our kids do. Add to the picture any type of attentional difficulty, processing issue or memory weakness a child has, and tracking time gets even trickier. With younger kids, give them five minute time calls. Then, as they become familiar with how time passes, work your calls out to ten minute intervals. This is great training and also gets the kids into the habit of clock watching.