

Reliable routines

Ten ways to make some new routines that work for you when the old ones are gone

By Chris Barnardo

As we get older, we are told that routine is something to avoid, a numbing thing that saps our creativity, stifles our energy and will dull our lustre if we let it. But like it or not, routine is something that we all need a bit of. It is the framework that provides us the security to step out and be creative when we want to. For kids life without routine is very frightening and confusing. When parents split up their children's routines are the first

casualty. New routines need to be set up quickly. They act as a cushion for the emotional turmoil that surrounds a family breakdown and provide a set reliable reference points for everyone involved.

For dads who suddenly find themselves seeing less of their children than they would like, setting up a few good solid routines can make life a lot more bearable. Dads are good at setting up routines, the best of which grow into family

traditions or with repeated use, etch themselves into our memories as happy times we spent together when we were younger.

Here are some great routines that hopefully will inspire you, or give you some ideas about the sort of things that you could be doing with your children to let them know that whatever happens there are still some things in life that they can rely on, so always:

Telephone your children at the same time every day or each week

Where this is possible arrange with your ex-partner that you will ring the children at the same time each day. If they are young, stick religiously to the routine. If ringing each day is not possible then fix the best day or days each week and then always ring on those at the agreed time. Wherever you are, make time to do it so your children can rely on you ringing. Sometimes they won't say much more than goodnight, other times they will chat away about all the things that they have done that day or in the last five minutes.

When you pick up your children always use the same distinctive knock or doorbell ring

Always be nice and happy when you pick up your children, whatever is said to you or has been said between you and your ex-partner beforehand. You want to make sure that your children don't get to associate your knock at the door or ring on the door bell with unhappy times.

Go to the bakery on your way back from picking them up and buy a bun each

The smell of bread is lovely and everything feels better when you have some food inside you.

If you don't live near a bakery, buy hot cross buns beforehand and then toast them the minute you get in.

Have and play a favourite tape, CD, or iPod playlist in the car

Choose tracks with your children or let them choose favourite ones that you can all sing along together to. Make sure that they are upbeat songs.

Always have the same favourite meal on the same day of the week

Make sure it is a healthy and tasty meal that your children like and then you know that they will look forward to it.

Set aside some time to do homework at the same time each week

At first this might seem like a chore, but get it right and you'll find yourself spending some real quality time with your children as you sit with them and help them through their homework. Not only do you get to see what they are doing at school, but later you know when they are at school, that bond between you and them will still be there when they hand in their homework.

Set aside one night every month as a home film night

Rent out that old favourite, or get the latest release, definitely get a bar of chocolate and maybe even some popcorn and make a routine out of it.

Read to your children at bedtime

Cosy in their beds, warm, happy, relaxed and listening to their dad read them a story, what kid could ask for more, what a lovely routine to look forward to. Get into a good book and you'll be looking forward to the next chapter as much as they do.

Set up a Birthday routine

Routines don't have to be just about what you do each week. Yearly routines are still ones that we remember as we grow up. Children whose mum and dad don't live together can't spend every birthday day with their mum AND dad. Learn how to be relaxed about this. Don't put too much pressure on THE day, if you can arrange it, alternate the years, if not don't make it a battlefield. Set up a nice birthday routine, a restaurant meal, or a special celebratory trip out. Make it a thing you can do each year, and plan to always do it. Next year will come around soon enough, and before you know it you will have a wonderful birthday tradition to look forward to that doesn't rely on the actual day itself.

Set up a Christmas time tradition to avoid relying on the BIG day

For the single dad, Christmas can be a tough time of year. Issues about who the children should spend the day itself and those either side can certainly turn what should be a very happy time into a nightmare to be dreaded. Once again try and mentally move yourself away from the idea that the whole holiday relies on the success of that one day. Develop a routine, or tradition that allows you to spread the happiness of the season across more than just one day. Make Christmas stockings with your children with their initial on. Make them properly so that they can keep them and bring them out again next year.