

# (201) family's special parent

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## Finding a morning routine that works

BY JAN WILSON

Getting your kids and yourself out of the house in the morning is difficult for everyone, but it can be a particular challenge if you have a special needs child. You have a limited amount of time and a schedule you have to meet, whether it's making the school bus on time or catching the train to work (or both). Even if your special needs child does not have the same degree of independence as a typical child, you might find you can employ the tried-and-true strategies—consistency, clear goals and lots of pre-planning—to calm the morning crazies and put everyone in the best frame of mind.

Dr. Yola Barbosa of Brain Balance Achievement Centers in Allendale, which helps children with neurobehavioral and learning difficulties, says a clear and understandable schedule is important when trying to get the morning off to a smooth start. You can take a page from the book of any preschool teacher and display a daily chart your children can refer to (with pictures if the child is unable to read).

"Use a visible calendar because children will feel calmer and safer knowing what is coming next," she

says. "Even if there is time that is reserved for something spontaneous to occur, you can put a question mark in that part of the chart."

Kim Cristo, a Midland Park mom of a 5-year-old daughter with autism who has to catch the school bus by 8 a.m., says that for her nonverbal child, who is also very set in her ways, a picture chart was key.

"She can see what needs to be done: getting dressed, brushing teeth, eating breakfast," Cristo says. "It helps put a schedule in her head."

### Importance of Ritual

All children enjoy rituals, and parents of special needs children find that they help the family cope in a sometimes confusing world. Christine Favaro, mom to a 16-year-old nonverbal son with autism, says the ritual of doing the same things in the same order is essential for her son to have a good start to the day.

"It's bathroom, shoes and out of the door," the Demarest resident says. "Everything has to be exactly the same. If the bus is late, our whole routine can fly out of the window."

Cristo says planning ahead has helped her daughter deal with anxiety about getting on the school bus.



"We initially had problems with putting her on the bus," she says. "And when she throws tantrums, you don't know why. We realized that she didn't like the bus driver honking the horn. So we were able to get the bus driver to stop doing that."

Cristo adds that having her daughter select the clothes she wants to wear in the morning is helpful.

"There's not going to be a tantrum if she has chosen something the night before," she says.

### Don't Skip Breakfast!

As parents, we all have had to fight the temptation to just pack the kids into the car with a granola bar, or even have them skip breakfast completely if they complain too much and are running late for the bus. But all children need sound nutrition to start the day and be their best at school. Favaro's husband, Vinny, makes breakfast for their son, who is a very finicky eater.

"I make special pancakes that can just be heated up in the morning," he says. "The key is to get as much as

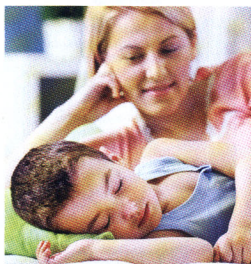
you can get prepped before the morning."

"Breakfast is important," Barbosa says. "It needs to be something with nutrients, not just a sugary cereal. I often recommend that families contact a nutritionist for ideas." She adds that families should make time to sit and eat together in the morning if possible. "I don't think that it is ever beneficial to eat in the car."

### A Good Morning Starts with a Good Night

All bets are off for a calm morning if your child isn't getting enough sleep. And sleep can be a real challenge with some children with autism, so the best thing to do is stick to a routine and hope it makes an impact.

"Parents need to keep a consistent sleep schedule and make sure you establish a consistent sleep and wake cycle with your child," Barbosa says. "I personally recommend pulling out all of the electronics in the room and making sure there is no screen or computer time at least two hours >



before bed, because this disrupts the sleep cycle."

She adds that bedrooms should be kept as dark as possible with no digital clocks or other light sources near where the child sleeps.

Vinny Favaro agrees. "Once we got the sleeping routine sorted out for my son," he says, "it was so much better. He's very good about getting up in the morning now."

### Other Family Members

The Favaros also have an 8-year-old daughter, and they say she has become a big participant in making the family's morning routine run smoothly.

"Getting her involved in his routine has been good for him," Vinny says, "and it's a big plus in the family's routine. She likes helping him to do things, and being a part of the care-giving role is helpful for her. She isn't alienated from him."

Cristo has a 1-year-old daughter and says living with her parents has provided crucial support for her entire nuclear family.

"The optimal thing is to have help if at all possible," she says.

Cristo adds that because her special needs daughter is a visual learner, she and her husband have been working with her using videos that demonstrate everyday activities so she might become more independent in the future, as the Cristos' second child gets older.

Having successful mornings can be a challenge regardless of your child's abilities. It's important for parents to trust their instincts and understand that no matter what system is in place, it will not work perfectly every time.

"There will be days and weeks

where you are going to be jammed up and you just have to understand," Vinny says. "I have taken multiple days off to be at home because this is too much for any one parent to have to do for themselves. You have to do it as a team and tackle it head-on." ♦



### BREAKFAST TIPS

The following are some great breakfast tips from Stacey Antine, MS, RD, founder of HealthBarn USA in Wyckoff (healthbarnusa.com) and author of *Appetite for Life: The Thumbs-Up, No-Yucks Guide to Getting Your Kid to be a Great Eater*.

1) Fruit and yogurt smoothies are a tasty, nutritious boost to the start of the day. Put all the ingredients into the blender and place in the refrigerator the night before. Take it out in the morning, blend it up and serve with fun straws!

2) Homemade muffins are a delicious grab-and-go breakfast that kids love. Make an extra batch to freeze and just warm in the toaster in the morning.

3) Use fresh berries for an antioxidant boost to the immune system. A bowl of freshly cut strawberries, blueberries or raspberries always get a thumbs up from kids!

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