

Establishing routines in non-traditional families

Helping children feel comfortable in their home will lead to healthier and more successful times during those formative years. But it's easier said than done, especially for non-traditional families. That's why Jill Schreiber, LCSW, Ph.D., an OSF HealthCare psychotherapist, is making parents aware of resources and best practices.

Defining caregiving

Dr. Schreiber says while families look different across the world, in the United States a traditional family is seen as a mother, father and children. A mom and dad with adopted children would also fall into this category because the kids are a permanent part of the home.

A non-traditional family is any unit that falls outside of the traditional definition. Examples include parents who have divorced and re-married other partners, grandparents caring for kids, two moms or two dads in a family, adults co-parenting and children in care. Dr. Schreiber says children in care is the modern, accepted way of describing foster children, or children who are in a home temporarily. The adults are simply called caregivers, not foster parents. Dr. Schreiber, herself, is a former caregiver to children in care and a parent of adopted children.

Establishing routines

Dr. Schreiber says routines allow life to be "less chaotic and more predictable." Settling into routines will take time. But Dr. Schreiber says when a child enters a new home, it can be scary. So having *some* structure right away is a good idea. Talk to the child about when it's time to sleep, eat, do chores, do homework and have play time. For example, run through the morning routine – getting out of bed, having breakfast, getting ready in the bathroom and heading to school. Same for the wind down at the end of the day.

Keep in mind that there's no one-size-fits-all approach. Certain parts of the year, like back-to-school season, are busier. Kids with attention deficits, for example, may need more help sticking to routines. A child who always got dinner from the gas station may not know what setting the dinner table is all about.

"Adjusting is constant," Dr. Schreiber says. "Kids continue to evolve, develop and get older. You quit having naps, for example. You have to develop new routines as you go along."

As the child adjusts, it's good to review successes and struggles to modify expectations. Routines also may be different in different homes.

Don't forget the essentials

While it may not fit the definition of a routine, Dr. Schreiber says non-traditional families should also have essentials for their children. Those things we take for granted are just as important to make the youngsters feel comfortable: working heat, air conditioning, plumbing and lights; safety items like smoke detectors; keeping items like guns locked away.

"It's helpful for kids to have their own space, and it's helpful for kids to *know* where their space is," Dr. Schreiber adds.

"Kids who have come into care often come with garbage bags of their possessions. That's such a tough symbol for children to feel like their stuff is garbage. So, to help them put their stuff into drawers or onto shelves is a really important step to show their value and connection to the family."

Resources for parents

Parents who need help setting up routines can talk to a mental health professional, read a parenting book or take a parenting class. There are also "parent networks" like online forums where you can exchange advice. Those informal "networks" could also take the form of bonafide support groups. Your state's child welfare agency may also offer tips. In fact, caregivers of children in care must undergo formal training from an organization like that.

Read more about mental and behavioral health care on the [OSF HealthCare website](#).