

DEALING EFFECTIVELY WITH DIFFICULT SITUATIONS

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Have you ever noticed that there are certain times of day or situations during which struggles with your children seem almost guaranteed? Getting ready for school? Family dinners? Completing homework or chores? Bed-time? Even generally well-organized and positive families experience occasional problems with certain routines. Through a simple problem-solving process, you have the ability to stop dreading and start enjoying (or at least dealing effectively) with these typically difficult times.



Identify the problem. Be as clear as possible about the problem; considering who is involved, where it happens, and what is said and done. For instance, the Blairs are divorced parents who share custody of their two children, 7 and 10 years old. They experience the following recurring problem: *When Dad comes to pick up the kids on Thursday afternoons, the kids are unprepared. The parents then shout directions to the kids and sometimes argue with one another while their kids scramble to collect their belongings. The children leave Mom's house unhappy and often forget items.*

Set goals. Decide what you would like to have happen during those difficult periods. Create a vision for a successful routine (what the situation might look in "ideal" circumstances). The Blair family's vision for the transition is: *When Dad arrives, the kids will be dressed and packed with all necessary belongings and the entire exchange change takes less than 5 minutes to complete.*



Find patterns. Develop a better understanding of the reasons for the problems. Pay close attention during difficult times and ask yourself, "What are the circumstances associated with this situation at its best and worst?" The Blair family is at its best when: *Everything is packed and beside front door, when the kids have time to settle home from school and have a snack before leaving, and when there is little conversation between Mom and Dad.* The Blair family is at its worst when: *The kids aren't ready, when Mom and Dad shout orders to kids, when kids leave items behind, and when Mom and Dad have heated conversations on difficult topics while waiting for the kids.*



Also consider what outcomes might be causing the pattern to continue (what is the "payoff" for the problem behavior?). The Blair family came up with the following: *The kids put off leaving Mom's house, the time and Mom and Dad are together with the kids is extended, and the kids get to see Mom later when she brings items left behind. The more chaotic the transition, the more interaction the kids receive from Mom and Dad.*

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Create strategies. Use what you have learned to develop the best solution for the problem. Make changes to prevent or minimize problem, replace unpleasant interactions with positive behaviors, and manage the consequences to encourage those new behaviors.



-Avoid or minimize problems. Change the surroundings or routines to minimize conflict and help situations go more smoothly. The Blairs decided to: *Have kids pack the night before and leave everything by front door before heading to school in the morning, as well as schedule a later pick up to give the kids more transition time between school and pick-up. The Blairs would make a visual checklist of the items that each child needed to include to attach to their bags.*

-Replace/teach behavior. Encourage behaviors you want to occur rather than falling into patterns of unpleasant or unproductive behavior, particularly during stressful periods. The Blairs began: *Reminding their children of their expectations and time schedule prior to transitions. They had to teach effective organizational strategies such as planning, creating lists, and checking, as well as model appropriate behavior (by not arguing) during transitions.*

-Manage outcomes/payoff. Reward positive behavior and discourage unproductive behavior by controlling access to the “pay-off.” The Blairs decided that: *When the kids are ready on time, both Mom and Dad will praise and reward them. Dad will allow them 30 minutes of tech time (TV, computer, video games) when they get to his house. At Mom’s house on the night before transition, if the kids have their bags packed they can have access to tech toys (TV, computer, video games). If the kids are not ready when Dad arrives, he will wait outside in the car while Mom gives very brief directions, minimizing interaction during these times. Also, if kids leave items behind, they have to do without them until they return.*



Make sure it works. After putting the plan in place, ask yourself if the strategies have been successful, specifically “Are we doing what we said we’d do?”, “Is it making a difference?”, and “Are we reaching our goals? You will have to decide how long you will try the new strategies before stopping to judge whether they are working. The Blair family decided to: *Evaluate progress after each weekly transition. When the kids were settled at Dad’s house, Dad called Mom and they reviewed their afternoon. If they had experienced problems, they discussed why and suggested possible ways to revise to the plan. They rated each transition on a scale from 1–10 (1 being the worst transition ever, 10 being their “ideal” transition) so they could track improvements over time.*

By following this simple problem-solving process, you can replace difficult family routines with effective routines. You can decide what you want the routine to look like, develop an understanding of why the old routines weren’t working by considering when the routines are at their best and worst, and put in place strategies to prevent problems, activate new behaviors and expectations, and manage consequences to make our newly designed routine possible.

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