

# Routine: less is often more when it comes to children's development

September 23 2020, by Debbie Pope

---



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

As a mother of three grown-up children, I vividly recall the panic I felt when the annual six-week summer school holidays approached. Weeks of potential chaos loomed ahead as the regular routines were disrupted. My psychological knowledge just added to the stress. Research [consistently pointed](#) to the importance of regular and stable routines in

raising emotionally secure children.

My sympathies therefore immediately went out to all the parents who had to stay home indefinitely with their [children](#) during the COVID-19 lockdown. More recent research findings continue [to find links](#) between household chaos, such as background noise or lack of [routine](#), and adverse outcomes for children—from behavioral to academic.

But can there be such a thing as too much routine? And could it interfere with children's sense of independence and creativity?

Many parents (including myself), and especially those more affluent and "[middle class](#)", often unknowingly adopt a "hyper" or "helicopter" parenting style. This involves [planning the majority of their children's lives](#) in detail, via structured classes and activities.

This has in fact become the norm within many social networks, and is reinforced by the commercial sector. Indeed, many children now expect their [leisure time](#) to consist of organized "enrichment" activities—artistic, educational, social and physical—such as dance classes or birthday parties. This in turn [drives parents to continue](#) to provide and support such activities.

But from the perspective of cognitive psychology, extremely rigid routines and heavy parental control is not always beneficial for children's development. That's because a fundamental part of growing up is learning how to tackle new challenges, going beyond predetermined routines.

We know that [executive functions](#), the cognitive control mechanisms that support a number of higher-level processes including planning, multitasking and decision-making, are [linked to important life outcomes](#). Studies have shown that the more time that children spend in less

structured activities, such as playing on their own, the better their self-directed executive functioning. The opposite [is true of overly structured activities](#), such as rule-driven sporting activities.

Controlling parenting in young childhood has also been found to [reduce independence in adolescence](#). That's because children [learn to manage their own time](#) and develop important skills for healthy development during [free play](#), such as self belief and confidence in their ability to achieve their own goals.

## **The benefits of boredom**

Parents often believe that children growing up in today's byte-sized society [have decreased attention spans](#) and that organized activities can prevent them from getting bored.

But psychology suggests that boredom itself can be beneficial by acting as a motivating force, encouraging children to [seek out new experiences](#). Boredom motivates our quest for meaning and exploration by promoting associative thoughts, which can in turn [promote creative and intelligent thinking](#), as well as reflection.

Most people follow routines to some extent, because it saves us time and energy for important tasks. But parents who enforce extremely rigid routines in all aspects of life can lose opportunities to develop and use their own imagination and creativity, which could then brush off on their children. One study found that highly creative parents tend to have highly creative children—despite the fact that genetics accounts for only a small proportion of people's creativity. Instead, children seem to learn creativity from those around them.

Parental flexibility isn't just important for creativity. During the COVID-19 lockdown, it has also been [linked to greater family bonds](#) and

constructive parenting. The lockdown may in fact have helped many [parents to step back and evaluate their interests](#) and work out how to share them with their children.

In many cases, this may have led to a change in the repetitive nature of family routines, [such as mealtimes](#). This need not have resulted in negative outcomes. Rather than mealtimes being predictable, with rushed and boring routines, there was opportunity for more family time. This allowed children to have more involvement in meal preparation, and more time for conversation, negotiation and play—something [we know is beneficial](#).

In the UK, the helicopters are now beginning to take off again as children return to quasi-normality. But before we plan all our children's time to make up for lost education and "wasted time", we may want to reflect on some of the unexpected benefits of the unscheduled grounding.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Routine: less is often more when it comes to children's development (2020, September 23) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-09-routine-children.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--