

# The Importance of Establishing Routines for Young Children

– By Guillermina (Guille) Cendejas

I have worked for the nonprofit organization RCMA since 1996 and dedicated my time to the children and families it serves.

Throughout the 26 years, I have learned that routines are important to children and their families. They begin to build a foundation for everyday life skills that children need as they grow up. Routines are also good for children to follow because they help social, emotional and cognitive growth and language skills. I want to explain what our early childhood classroom routines are, how to establish them, and how important it is that parents also create routines at home.

There are several routines that are very important for young children to understand and follow. In my experience, all these routines help the children to become independent and friendly with other children and ready to help other people who need help. They also help me run the class and observe in what area each child needs more help. Here are the routines I establish in my class around the schedule for the day; I use the High Scope Infant / Toddler Schedule.



High Scope Infant/Toddler Curriculum (<https://highscope.org/our-practice/infant-toddler-curriculum/>)

We follow these routines every day, and I always try to make them fun and funny by animating my voice.

This is the daily schedule that we follow in my classroom. For Arrival Time, there is a picture of parents with a child, another one of children eating breakfast, one that shows group time, clean up time, etc. You can see a Little Angel on Velcro just between Snack Time and the picture of parents picking the child up at the end of the day. We move the little angel around to the routine that we are on.



**Arrival Time.** When they enter, I ask, “How are you today?” and have them wash their hands. “Go sign in because you are here.” There are two pictures on the wall at their height level—one of a house and one of a school—and a picture for each child. They get their picture from the house and put it in the school. And I ask, “Who is this?” They recognize the picture. And they say, “Me, me!” Or they say the name of a classmate. If they have difficulty saying the name, we repeat it. We always talk and ask questions.

**Bodily Care Time.** This is where I change diapers (though I do it anytime necessary, of course). “I’m changing your diapers. And this is a wipey.” I say these things to teach them and make them comfortable. I have them play with something while I change them and make it a beautiful moment. They look at butterflies on the ceiling! Or I ask, “Where are your eyes? Where is your nose? At first, they just point, but later they say the words. We wash hands (several times a day): We sing Happy Birthday or another song about washing hands and look in the mirror to make it fun.





**Breakfast Time.** We eat family style. We talk about the food—what color it is, if it’s good, if they want more. We respond to their questions. We try to enjoy the meal like a family, with the teacher sitting at the table.

**Brush Teeth.** We give each one a brush with their name and a little cup with a small amount of toothpaste, and I brush my teeth with them. “Oh, my teeth are so clean.” Show me, “Look, Guille, look?” I ask, “What color is your brush?” And we change the brush every three months. They often want the same color, but sometimes it’s not the same. “This is a new one with a different color, so you learn your colors!”

**Choice Time.** “Ok, go change the angel because now it’s choice time, and where do you want to play?” Table toys? Whatever the child wants to play, they can choose – puzzle, blocks, cars, animals, house, phone, nesting toys – I support their choice. I help them if they get frustrated. If two want the same toy, I say, “We have more than one. You can have one, too.” If we don’t have another one, I say, “When he’s finished, he’ll give it to you.” I try to give them another toy and make them excited about it to distract their attention.



**Activity Time.** My partner and I prepare everything the day before to meet core requirements (choice, color, shapes, flowers, animals, talking). We work together. The teacher supports the activity with language. “This is red. Oh, this is red (with animation). Can you find more red? Who has this color in their clothes?”



**Outside Time.** This is the time for gross motor skills, running, sliding, ball play, biking, water table, sand box, painting, learning about nature – plants and animals. We call, “Where are you, lizard?” “Where are you, frog?” They follow me slowly and quietly and say the same with a song. They look at the lizard but don’t touch. They say, “Look, Guille, a bird!” They learn words because I always talk to them. And then I say, “In two more minutes, it’s time to clean up because it’s time to go inside.” So, they go to the outside sink and wash their hands to be ready to go inside.

**Music Time.** This is the time to learn different movements like Up, Down and Around. They love to use the flashlight and move it up, down and around. They use instruments, other things to make sounds, dance with the dolls, move, sing songs about body parts or Twinkle, Twinkle. Sometimes we do this by CD, sometimes I sing, sometimes we sing together, and they play instruments. When we play Jack Be Nimble, they wait their turn to jump over the candle stick, which is a good opportunity to talk about fire. “It’s hot. Be careful.” Again, there are many choices.



**Lunch Time.** Once again, we eat family style. We encourage them to eat all the food and drink the milk. If they don’t like vegetables, we learn the colors and talk about how good they are. They learn to use a spoon, fork, etc. and not their hands! They start to drink from a regular cup. If someone wants water, I offer it.



**Nap Time.** At the end of last season, a child said, "Help me sleep." I patted his back and moved my hand around to comfort him and help him fall asleep. If they wake up early, we give them a quiet activity, for example a puzzle or a book, coloring paper, or a doll with a blanket.



**Snack Time.** During snack time, we talk about the food, the colors, the shapes. I offer the snack, but sometimes they say "No!" They want to continue sleeping.

**Departure.** Now it's time for parents to pick them up. We share information about the child's day with the parents.

Sometimes I need help with something, and I ask the parent and work with them, like using a spoon or a regular cup. I explain to the parents and ask them to do the same at home. A parent might need my help in potty training, for example. We talk about it and work together.

At the beginning of this season, I had four children who had never attended daycare. They cried for days. The moms were concerned, but I told them that it was normal. Now, two weeks later, the children are smiling when they come in and go directly to wash their hands. I said to the moms, "See, I told you it would be OK." The moms are very thankful.

I know the children have learned these routines because sometimes I forget to follow one, and a child will say, "Guille, Guille....." For instance, once it was time to go outside. I have an apron with all the tools we need outside, and I also have a hat. We were at the door ready to go outside, and "Guille, no, no." The child went and got my hat and brought it to me! So, the child reminded me of our routine! Then when we come inside and I take off my apron, they run to the music area and pick up the instruments without my saying anything.

**How do you establish routines?** At the beginning of the year, it's not easy. The children want to play with everything and throw the toys at breakfast time, but I start introducing the schedule. I announce, "In two more minutes, we will start to clean up because it's activity time." But they want to play. Sometimes they cry! But soon, when I say, "In two minutes, it's time to go outside," they clean up because they like to go outside. At the end of the season, it's easy because they have established routines. I don't pick up the toys! They want to go to the next activity, so they clean up. "Oh, you finished! Come over here."

But it's not enough to have routines at school. We encourage the parents to have similar routines at home, especially when they visit the school and during home visits. We discuss how helpful routines are and ask them about routines at home. We tell them what their child did in the classroom. They're often surprised because the child doesn't clean up or brush his teeth at home! But I might take a picture and show the parents how the child follows routines at school. I teach them that when their child starts to play, say, "You can play here but remember you have to pick up." Play together with your child so he or she learns, cleans, follows the routine. We teach the parents the song: "Clean up, clean up, everybody, everywhere. Clean up, clean up, everybody do your share."

In the beginning they won't want to clean up but motivate them. "I'll help you clean up this time. What color is this (as you clean up). How many blocks did you put away?" Clean up and learn! We have better results if we work together.

We can see a big difference from the beginning to the end of the school year. The children have learned good routines, and they are ready for the next levels – Early Steps, preschool, and preparing for VPK. Teachers, parents, and the day care office resources, working together, help children grow and learn in a healthy way. This is my focus and the principal goal of the children's early education.

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