

FUSSBUSTERS

at home



**AROUND-THE-CLOCK
STRATEGIES AND GAMES**

FOR SMOOTHING THE ROUGH SPOTS IN

YOUR PRESCHOOLER'S DAY

CAROL BAICKER-McKEE, PH.D.


PEACHTREE
ATLANTA

Dedicated to my mother,
Teddy McKee, who, thanks to me,
the formerly crabby daughter,
is as expert as they come
in handling children who fuss.

—C B-M



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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	xi

CHAPTER ONE

Eyeopeners! Energizing Ways to Start the Day 1

Un-Alarm Clocks: Gentle Strategies to Rouse Your Slug-A-Bed.	3
Early Bird Delay Tactics: Encouraging Your Child to Sleep Later.	5
Snooze Buttons: Keeping Your Wide-Awake Child from Waking You	6
The Pot Stop: To the Bathroom, Robin!	9
To Tell the Tooth: Toothbrush Tips and Timers	10
Face Scrubbers: Wash Up Wake Up.	12
Robo-Valet: Dressing-Squabble Squashers	14
Capes Go with Everything! Coping with Clothing Fetishes.	16
Hair Doozies: Untangling Hair-do Don'ts	18
Skills Seminar: A Do-It-Myself Outerwear Overview	20
Howdy Do, Dee: Welcoming Rituals.	23
Bye and Seek: Transition into a Game	24
End of the Rode: Sharing a Mini-Commute	26
Blast Off Together! Ready on the Launch Pad.	27
Time Machines and Other Safety Seat Lures: Buckle Up for Safety Strategies	29
Static Guard: Help for Those Unsightly Cling-Ons.	31



FUSSBUSTERS AT HOME

CHAPTER TWO

Please Hold! 33

Red Light, Green Light: Traffic Control for Busy Times 34

Nice Ice! Help Your Child “Chill Out” While You Are Busy 36

Bucket o’ Beans: An Indoor Sandbox 38

Play-Dough Pizzazz: New Fun with an Old Favorite. 40

Snack-tivities: Make It-Eat It Play. 42

Potion Play: Making a Sort-of-Controlled Mess 44

Concocting Color: Play with Colored Water 46

No Muss, No Fuss—But Art! A Smorgasbord of Grab-and-Do,
 No-Mess Art Activities. 48

Bubble Up Fun: Things to Do with Soap and Water
 for Kids Who Don’t Like to Wash 49

Barbershop Quintet: Five Grooming Stuff Activities 51

Pretendables: Themes That Enchant 53

Order in the Court: Seriation and Sorting Play 55

Tub Ball: Bouncy Ball Races 56

These Activities Make Cents: Easy Penny Games 57

Telephone Treasure Chest: A Nest Egg for Desperate Times. 59

CHAPTER THREE

“It’s Not Fair!” but Siblings Squabble Anyway 61

Sibling Bonds without Handcuffs: Activities to Promote
 Caring Relationships 62

Please Stop! Preventing Sibling Abuse 64

Choosers: Games for Picking “It” 66

Even-Uppers: Handicaps for Fair Play 68

Tease-Ease: Tease-Proofing Your Child. 69

Un-Tattle Tales: Techniques for Minimizing Tattling. 71

Toy Story: “Once Upon a Time, There Were Siblings
 Who Loved to Share” 72

Table of Contents

Non-Binding Arbitration: Mediating Sibling Spats
 without Tying Anyone Up 75

Baby Games: Things Your Preschooler Can Do
 with the Baby Besides Poke Him in the Eye 77

Toddler Games: Games for Preschoolers to Play
 with One- and Two-Year-Olds 79

Big Guy Games: Playing in the Big Kid Leagues 81

CHAPTER FOUR

Rest for the Leery 84

Settle-In Strategy: Helping Your Child Unwind 86

Rock-a-Bye-Bye: Help for Insomniacs and Strugglers 87

Pterodactyl Nests, Hidden Caves,
 and Other Special Sleepy Spots 89

Napster: Tuck-In Music 91

Here We Go Again! Instant Games to Ward Off
 Those Wake-Up Blues 92

Holding Tanks and Isolation Booths: Re-Entry Zones for the Crabby 94

Happy Wake Up to You! A Breathe-Up Game 96

Cat Naps: Giving-Up-Nap Time 97

No-Dozers and Rechargers: Metaphors for Sleepless Survival 99

Cuddle Up at the Snuggle Inn: Snuggly No-Sleeps 101

Story Snuggles: Love-ly Literary Lounging 103

All's Quiet on the Resting Front: Restful All-Along Fun 104

Wet Rests: Play Baths and Dribble-Drips 106

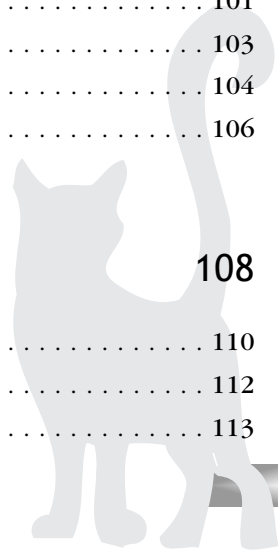
CHAPTER FIVE

Putting the "Great" in the Outdoors 108

Caddy Land: Get Organized to Stay Outside 110

Unpressed but Dressed: Outdoor Playwear 112

Boundary Basics: Showing Your Child the Lay of the Land 113



FUSSBUSTERS AT HOME

Frozen Fun: Snow Balls and Ice Spice 115

That Blows Me Away! Activities for Windy Days 118

Puddle Jumping and Mud Mucking: Rainy Day Play 120

Hot Day Cool Downs: Warm Weather Whine Coolers 122

Blasting Out of Sand Traps: Sandbox Problems and Solutions 124

But It's Wet! Dousing Water Woes 127

Turn-Taking Unscrewed: Backyard Etiquette 129

Bug Zappers: Keeping Creepy Crawlers at Bay 131

The Ants' Picnic and Other Ways to Befriend Bugs 134

Taking the Sting out of Stings and the Bite out of Bites 136

All Better Now! Taking Care of Bonks and Boo-Boos 138

First Aid (and Later Aid) for Feelings: Emotional Care of Boo-Boos 141

CHAPTER SIX

Arsenic Hour Antidotes 144

Reunion Rituals: Back Together Tactics 146

Attention! A Minute in Time Saves Nine 148

Snack City: Beating the Low-Blood-Sugar Blues 149

Hug Bugs: Quickie Snuggly, Lovey-Dovey Games 151

Popping Penguins: Getting the Jumpy-Jitteries Out 153

Mad about You and What to Do with Those Feelings 155

Whizzers: Blow Up Your Child's Bad Mood 157

Soothing Sounds: Taming the Wild Beasts 158

Bag of Tricks: A Hands-on Reminder List 160

Prop Master: A Quick Reminder of Good Toys for Arsenic Hour 161

Captain Cook: Directing All Hands in the Galley 163

More Cooking Chores for Short Chefs: Easy and Satisfying
 Kitchen Jobs 165

Table of Contents

CHAPTER SEVEN

Don't Throw In the Dish Towel Yet: Winning Food Fights 167

- Come to the Table:** Creating a Pre-Meal Routine 169
- Bon Appetit! Now We May Eat!** Rituals to Start the Feast 170
- Passing the Taste Test:** Living with Your Child's
 - Discriminating Palate 172
- The Breakfast Box** and Other Appetizing Food Presentations for Preschoolers . 175
- Stealth Veggies** and Other Sneaky Green Stuff Strategies 176
- Little Dippers:** Foods to Dip and Drip—and Eat! 179
- Read It and Eat:** Sneaky Literary Feasts 180
- Minimum Security Manners:** Eating with Kids
 - without Feeling like Barfing 183
- Conversation Starters:** Things to Discuss at the Table
 - Besides How Fat Your Stomach Is 185
- Define "One Bite"** and Other Common Food Fights 187
- Gimme Sugar, Buster!** Navigating the Shoals of Birthday Parties,
 - Junk Food Junkets, and Halloween Candy 188

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sleep-Ease: From Twilight to Nightlight 191

- Ready, Set...** Preparing for Tomorrow 193
- Bathtub Carwashes and Laundromats**
 - (and You Thought Baths Were for Bodies) 194
- Fun Floats and So Does a Pumpkin:** The Tub
 - As a Sink-and-Float Science Lab 196
- Home Spa Soaks:** Sensory Pleasures for the Bath 198
- "Hare Do's" and Sham-pooches:** Happier Hair Washing 200
- The Dry Through:** Out of the Tub and into the Towel 202
- Down at the Comb-and-Clip:** Detangling and Un-Nailing 203
- Goodnight, Molars:** Off to Bed, Brushed, and Flossed 205

FUSSBUSTERS AT HOME

The Pajama Game: No-Swear Evening Wear 207

Wind Me Down, Scottie: The Final Power-Down Routine 209

Goodnight, Moon: A Celestial Into-Bed Strategy 211

Stories and Stretches: Good Reads for Good Nights 213

Pillow Talk: Boosting Your Child’s Memory and Happiness 215

Let’s Sleep at the Beach Tonight: “You Are Getting Sleepy” Stories 217

Monster Repellent and Other Ways to Discourage Things

That Go Bump in the Night 219

How to Smooch Your Sweetie: The Very Best Ways

to Hug and Kiss and Say Goodnight 221

You Got a License to Do That? Dealing with

Delay-of-Game Penalties 223

After Midnight: Keeping Those Little Bed Bugs out of Yours 225

Dry Trying: Dealing with Night Wetting 227

CHAPTER NINE

The Mush Pot **229**

Creature Comforts for Sick Puppies: Soothing and Boosting 230

Just a Spoonful of Sugar: Getting the Medicine Down

without Mary Poppins 233

The Poop Scoop: Dealing with Assorted Potty Problems 235

Remote Control: Caging the Television Monster 239

Your Kid Sucks! And You Think It’s Time for Him to Stop 241

Thar She Blows! Advice from the Federal Tantrum

Management Agency 244

Wild Things and Whiners: Getting to Know Your Child’s

Fussing Style 246

“I’m Counting to Three!” and Other Transition-Taming Strategies 248

Time-out Teddies: When Fussing Won’t Bust 250

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FUSSBUSTERS AT HOME

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May you all bust the fusses that blow your way.

—C B-M

Introduction

About the Author

OR, HOW I CAME TO WRITE A BOOK THAT MENTIONS
THE WORD "POOP" AT LEAST A DOZEN TIMES

I entered parenthood with my eyes open—and my nostrils pinched shut, since I already knew something about stinky pants.

I grew up in a family with four children, the youngest of whom was born when I was ten, in suburban neighborhoods teeming with children. By the time I entered college, having logged zillions of babysitting hours, I'd seen most baby and kid stuff firsthand, much of it repeatedly. I could change poopy *cloth* diapers with one hand (the other, naturally, was holding my nose), wrestle four rambunctious, fighting brothers into pajamas and their beds at something reasonably close to their ordained bedtime without using a single four-letter word, and laugh hysterically at fart jokes when the situation demanded. And, as a former "challenging" child myself, I had some insider knowledge about how to handle the toughest of the tough.

I picked up more knowledge about kids over the next ten years or so. I majored in psychology at Yale University and earned a Ph.D. in clinical child psychology at the University of Virginia. In and around my schooling I garnered additional practical experience. I volunteered at a daycare

FUSSBUSTERS AT HOME

center in college, taught in the toddler room at Harvard Yard Child Care Center after graduation, and spent a couple of summers during graduate school teaching in the U.Va. laboratory preschool. Later I worked as a child and family therapist in various inpatient and outpatient settings. In the process, I helped tame kids who manipulated their parents into buying toys by threatening to speed dial the number for Child and Youth Services, and hyperactive four-year-olds whose desperate parents had been forced to install iron bars on all the windows and settle for furnishings constructed entirely from foam rubber. As a teacher, I even dressed a dozen toddlers in snowsuits, boots, hats, *and* mittens in under an hour—with only two other adults helping! What more could there possibly be to learn?

So, when parents coming for therapy challenged my credentials by asking whether I had children of my own, I smiled serenely and reassured them that although I didn't have kids, I'd had *plenty* of experience with young children and knew *exactly* what they were going through.

To those parents I say, "Sorry!"

Because of course I didn't have a clue. There is not a class, book, or experience that can prepare you for the reality of parenthood.

Two things make parenthood more difficult than other childcare jobs. The first is the 24-7-52-eternity-every-single-little-detail nature of it. Whether you stay home with the little tykes or go off to work in an office for ten hours a day, once you become a parent you are never really "off duty." The responsibility travels with you wherever you go. The worries, hopes, and memories weigh down your shoulders and clog your brain cells. And fill your pockets with sticky black things you'd rather not examine closely.

The second is love.

Parent love is the kind that keeps you up all night watching the breathing of a baby with the sniffles. The kind of love that chokes your throat with an impossibly big lump when you even watch *commercials* with toddlers prancing about in tutus. The kind of love that makes you willing to

Introduction

discuss your child's boogers with perfect strangers in line at the grocery store while he's wiping same on the sleeve of your new winter coat.

You'd think that kind of love would give you some kind of advantage in the childcare game. That it would endow you with endless patience, wisdom, and compassion. But it doesn't. Partly because no amount of love can surmount the fatigue and general grinding down of your personal reserves that comes with parenting young children. But mostly because it's almost impossible to remain calm, objective, and rational when you *care* so much. And it makes it hard to believe that *your* child would turn out to be the kind who throws temper tantrums that register on the Richter scale because you won't let him wear the ripped Captain America suit he found at a garage sale to Aunt Karen's wedding, who teases his sister unmercifully by making funny noises with his armpits, who whines that there's nothing to *doooooo-oo* right after you've spent \$300 on new toys, and who sneaks off to visit the neighbors at six o'clock in the morning absolutely buck naked when he is nearly four and surely old enough to know better, for goodness' sake!

But probably he will. At least mine did. All three of them. And that's why I wrote *FussBusters*. Kids and fusses go together like barf and diarrhea (we can thank my middle son for providing that last analogy—see what I'm up against?). And, although I never learned the secret for raising perfect little angels, from the many talented teachers, therapists, parents, and grandparents I've encountered in my schooling, work, and around the neighborhood, I *have* acquired strategies and ideas that often can nip everyday fusses in the bud. And sometimes prevent them outright. And, best of all, that can actually make life with young kids the enjoyable adventure it should be. Boogers and all.

About This Book

FussBusters at Home features quick and easy activities and tips for the everyday difficult moments that are all too common with young children. You know, like waking up, getting dressed, eating breakfast,...and so on

FUSSBUSTERS AT HOME

throughout the day. With *FussBusters*, you can transform boring or aggravating at-home events into experiences that your child—and you—may actually find pleasurable and stimulating. And you can enjoy these activities and ideas without a magic wand (though that helps—pretend is fine), a degree in early childhood education, or even a stockpile of egg cartons and Styrofoam trays!

FussBusters at Home is arranged to make it easy to find the right activity or tip you need *when* you need it. The chapters loosely track the events of a day at home with young children from the moment when their little fingers peel your eyelids open to the final moments spent shooing monsters out from under the bed. Within chapters, I have grouped activities into subcategories to fit specific situations or needs. For example, in chapter 5, “Putting the ‘Great’ in the Outdoors,” I’ve included ideas for setting up a low-fuss play area, solving common play problems, and coming up with fun activities in yucky weather.

Each chapter opens with an introduction that highlights common problems, relevant developmental issues, and general suggestions. The individual activities are described with brief, easy-to-follow instructions. Occasionally, I have included safety tips, real-life anecdotes, or references to enriching resources, such as books, music albums, and websites.

Preschooler Principles

The following are some characteristics of young children that have guided the development and selection of the activities in *FussBusters*. Understanding these principles may help you interpret your child’s responses and guide you in choosing activities to suit your child’s needs. Plus, this section gives me a chance to use that expensive education I spent years pursuing.

- ***Preschoolers like consistency, rituals, predictability.*** Life is full of surprises for young children. Anything that makes the world more predictable, that lets them know what to expect, makes them feel safer and braver. Repetition helps them master new skills, ideas, and language. Finally, routines help them develop

Introduction

responsibility—they learn what they should do when. “Do it again” is the credo of the young child. That’s why they want to have peanut butter and banana sandwiches on white bread with the crusts removed and cut into perfect triangles for lunch. Every day. For the next four years.

- ***As inconsistent as it seems, preschoolers like novelty and variety.*** They like novelty and variety—within a framework of predictability. Serve that perfect peanut butter and banana sandwich on a doll’s plate inside a cardboard box, and you’ll be a hero! On other occasions, your support and encouragement will help your child to welcome the new and accept changes.

Young children also have short attention spans and may need more frequent shifts of activities, with a balance of quiet and active things to do. That’s why they alternate between teasing their little sister in whispers and tackling her with Tarzan yells.

- ***Preschoolers need to move their bodies.*** Young children are developing their muscles and the neurological connections that control them. They need space and permission to be active and use their large muscles. They’ll use them in the dining room on the chandelier if you don’t send them outside. And don’t forget opportunities to use the small muscles in their hands and eyes as they do art projects, manipulate small toys, look at books, and disassemble the VCR.
- ***Preschoolers use all their senses.*** They learn with their whole selves. Sensory activities will capture their attention, and many, such as water play, have a wonderfully calming effect.

Preschoolers’ drive to use their senses can still cause trouble, though. Even though their emerging self-control helps them to refrain from touching things they shouldn’t or putting everything in their mouths, temptation may override their better judgment, leading them to try out your best makeup on the dog. Supervise and continue to childproof their play areas. Pay attention to the safety notes included with some *FussBusters* activities.

FUSSBUSTERS AT HOME

- ***Preschoolers' temperaments continue to shape their actions and reactions.*** Individual differences can be quite striking—and perfectly normal. Be flexible and respect your child's special needs, interests, tastes. Even if they run more strongly in favor of slugs and superheroes than yours do.
- ***Gender rules.*** Gender identification is quite strong during this period. Young girls may reject seemingly neutral activities as “just for boys,” and boys may refuse to do anything they see as “girl stuff.” If you have a little girl, odds are good that she will spend hours enveloped in tulle waiting for Prince Charming; and if you have a boy, expect to spend a great deal of time discussing the relative merits of various dinosaurs and arguing about whether he is allowed to pretend the hose nozzle is a ray gun that can annihilate his sister. These sexist attitudes will make you want to gag, but don't get too worked up. By first grade, most will have faded dramatically, even if you skip the equal rights lectures.

Preschooler Management 101

Ever wonder why your child is more cooperative with his teacher or grandparents? The main reason is security—he feels comfortable enough with you to risk making mistakes or even misbehaving. You can't (and wouldn't want to) change that. But another reason may be that teachers and grandparents have acquired skills from long and repeated experience with young children. Adopting these attitudes and strategies can make your life with your child easier—and more fun.

Anticipate

Remember both senses of this word:

- ***Be prepared.*** Thinking ahead will help you avoid problems and set the stage for success. For example, buy clothes your child can fasten himself or place dishes where he can reach them easily. You can also help prepare your child, whose sense of the future, recall

Introduction

of the past, and awareness of time is just developing, for events on the horizon. As much as possible, tell him what to expect, warn him of upcoming transitions, and remind him of important rules, like “Don’t say ‘poo-poo butt’ to Great Uncle Walter.”

- ***Look forward to.*** It’s easy to get bogged down in the drudgery of everyday life with a preschool child. Changing your mindset to expect pleasure, though, can improve both your mood and your child’s behavior. Take advantage of the opportunities young children offer you to slow down, to live in the here and now, to notice and marvel at all the small miracles in the world.

Communicate Clearly

Language is still a new skill for small children, so you have to make it easy for them to understand you. What works:

- Make sure you have their attention.
- Exaggerate your facial expressions, tone of voice, body language.
- Give only one or two directions at a time.
- Be specific.
- Don’t offer choices unless you mean them.
- Make sure you understand their messages.
- Give them the words they need.
- Use the word “poop” when you really need them to hear you.

Invoke Imagination and Humor

Making believe is an important and emerging skill during the preschool years. *And* it’s probably the easiest route to securing your child’s cooperation. He might balk at dressing for church, but he’ll cheerfully don his Sunday-best space suit! A good dose of silliness helps, too.

Reset Your Clock

Preschoolers have short legs, and most of the time we remember to adjust our strides to match their slower pace. But we also need to remem-

FUSSBUSTERS AT HOME

ber that *many* tasks take young children longer. Allowing enough time will reduce stress for everyone and boost your child's emerging competence.

Conversely, we sometimes need to speed things up, to adjust for children's shorter attention spans and smaller energy reserves. Two hours at the art museum is probably an hour and a half too long for most young children. Accept that, for a few years, you'll need to be flexible and accommodating.

Refocus and Reframe

Distraction, so effective with toddlers, is also a useful tool with preschoolers. Finding an element of challenge may be the best way to keep a child this age from noticing how much he dislikes something. For example, "I'll bet I can scrub my hands longer than you can!" can produce some impressively clean hands for both of you.

Just as reframing an old picture can bring out its beauty, so can describing an event differently change its impact. If your child was scared by a thunderstorm, you may be able to influence her perception of the experience by helping her notice how well she coped by closing her eyes and covering her ears.

Put Yourself in Your Child's Shoes

Stooping down to your child's size, sometimes literally, will help you make sense of his behavior and remind you of ways to structure his environment so he can succeed. It's good to remind yourself that he may not be able to see what's on the countertop, reach the rack to re-hang his towel, or carry that heavy plate.

Take Care

- ***Of Your Child*** Your child may loudly assert her competence and independence, but the next minute she may beg for you to help take off her socks. You should expect her to need you especially when she is tired, ill, or stressed by new experiences or problems

Introduction

with her friends or at home. And, no matter how capable she seems, she will need frequent encouragement and reassurance, as well as regular physical contact and demonstrations of your love and affection.

- ***Of Yourself*** On airlines, flight attendants instruct you to fit your own oxygen mask before you help your child—if you pass out, you’ll be no use to your child, and she may not be able to help you. The same principle holds true in everyday life. So don’t feel guilty about using activities just to give yourself a half-hour to read a magazine. And feel free to skip suggestions that you find unappealing.

A Word on the Worst Parent in the World

It isn’t you. Even if, like me, you suddenly feel like the *worst* parent when you flip through a book crammed with fun activities to do with your child and tips on managing her behavior. I always start thinking, “Geez Louise! I could never do all that with my kids!” I even started thinking that when I read through the final draft of this book. Especially since while I was doing that, I was *completely* ignoring my kids.

Actually, lots of the activities and strategies in this book *are* things I did with my kids—at least at some point in the *eight* years that I had preschoolers. If you have eight years of preschoolers ahead of you, you might get in lots of them, too. Usually, we would go on sort of activity jags. For example, for a while we would really be into sensory wake-ups. A few weeks later, everyone would be waking up fine, and we’d be into playing bubbles while mommy typed on the computer. Or eating dinner under the table to encourage my notoriously picky eaters to consume at least a handful of calories.

Most of the ideas in here worked for us, but in all honesty some of them didn’t. The same will probably be true for you. If I included them in here anyway, it’s because I know parents who did find them helpful.

FUSSBUSTERS AT HOME

Families and kids are like snowflakes—no two alike. Other activities are ones that I wish I'd done—things I've learned about when it was too late for me.

This book isn't a textbook. You need not read it cover to cover—I promise, no pop quizzes. Pick and choose a few activities or strategies that suit you and your child, adding to your repertoire over time. Before long, you too may be a professional (or at least a highly skilled amateur) FUSSBUSTER!

I welcome your comments and suggestions for future editions of this book. You can reach me care of Peachtree Publishers or at baickermckee@adelphia.net



CHAPTER ONE

Eyeopeners! Energizing Ways to Start the Day

I am not a morning person. Neither are two of my three children. The third is a cheery ray of sunshine. We hate her. Just kidding. We've actually managed to reprogram her, and now on school mornings she's nearly as grumpy as the rest of us.

That's why I feel a little hypocritical giving some of this advice like, "Get up before your children do." During my years of preschoolers, I could never manage it. I was too exhausted. There was always someone nursing, having nightmares or growing pains, wetting the bed, being awakened by a queasy stomach or raging ear pain, or simply feeling a bit lonely and in need of a cuddle. Or I was pregnant and getting up every two hours to pee. Whatever the reason, I think something like seven years passed before I got a full night's sleep. So my strategy was to stay in bed until there were simply too many people tugging on my eyelids and jumping on my stomach. (Oddly, these days I do get up early and reasonably cheerfully.) I'm leaving the advice in, though, because my morning-people friends swear by it, and because nowadays I enjoy the peace of a first cup of coffee all by myself.





FUSSBUSTERS AT HOME

The one piece of advice I mostly did try to follow, despite strong temptations to ignore it, was: *Don't get hooked on TV*. If you need a half-hour's breathing room to get your shower, go ahead and plop the kiddies in front of something like Mr. Rogers or their 8,942nd viewing of *Winnie the Pooh and the Blustery Day*. But the minute you give in to Cartoon Network or even an extra hour of *Sesame Street*, you're sunk. Oh, all right, take away those bamboo slivers! I confess! I did give in at times, at least to Bert and Ernie (we didn't have cable or it probably would have been *Rugrats*). But I regretted it then, and I regret it now. An hour or two in front of the TV did not make my morning easier; it made it worse, beginning the moment I wrested control of the remote. Pick one show max, and make it early, because you can expect a fight anytime you have to skip "their show" for an early appointment.

Most threes and fours are early risers, so waking them may not be an issue unless you have to leave very early for work or something. Older preschoolers, though, may be starting to shift to staying up later and sleeping in a bit if they can. Also, some kids just come wired more like night owls than larks, and these kids can have a very tough time if your morning routine has to start early. And a bad morning mood can stay with young children (and adults) all day. I have used the gentle "alarm clocks" described in this chapter with my own kids (and myself) and they really do help—they may not completely remove the crabbiness, but they tamp it down to livable levels.

Even those remarkable children who wake up sunny and energetic may struggle with the rest of getting going. Morning involves so many transitions—from asleep to awake, from pajamas to clothes, and, often, from home to school or daycare or even just out to play. And preschoolers *bate* transitions. Mornings also involve routines that are frequent sources of conflict with young kids, like washing, toileting, and eating. You may not be able to avoid some of the triggers, but these general reminders can usually help ease the morning "madness":

- Try to get up before your child—even ten minutes will help.
- Give your child enough time. More than you think.

Eyeopeners!

- Make it easy for your child to take care of herself by choosing supplies she can use herself and storing them within her reach.
- Do as much preparation as possible the night before.
- Don't bother with the unnecessary—your daughter will survive without an elaborate hairstyle, and no one will die of starvation if you don't serve a hot breakfast.
- Unplug the television set. Really.
- Create consistent routines and rituals for reconnecting.

The activities in this chapter address the most common morning hot spots—waking, dressing and grooming, and getting out the door—and should help pave the way for you to create a kinder, gentler morning.

Un-Alarm Clocks:

GENTLE STRATEGIES TO ROUSE YOUR SLUG-A-BED

Do not wake a sleeping child! Unfortunately, sometimes you must ignore this good advice. Try some of these sensory tactics to wake your child gently.

Wake Up, Toes!

Touch your child awake, starting with his toes. Gently squeeze them through the covers while whispering, “Wake up, toes!” Work your way up his body, waking his legs, back, belly button, etc., saving his eyes for last. Gently stroke his eyelids, brushing away the sleepy dust. Finish with a hug. Let your voice increase in volume as you work your way up. Add some humor. For example, wake his toes again and again, as they keep going back to sleep. Many kids will be giggling and snuggly by the time you finish.

Another “touching” way to wake your child: Try stroking his face with various soft objects, such as a piece of silky fabric, your hair, a feather, a makeup brush. Can he guess what you're using?

The Smell-a-roma Wake-a-matic

Don't you love waking to the smell of freshly brewed coffee and home-made muffins? The sense of smell is housed in a primitive part of our

FUSSBUSTERS AT HOME

brains, and scientists have long recognized the powerful ways that smell is linked to emotions and memories. Use pleasant smells to waken your child in a happy frame of mind. To make a good “smeller,” soak a cotton ball with scent (try flavorings like vanilla, hot cocoa, or orange juice) or



SAFETY ZONE

Some people are sensitive to scents, especially artificial ones like those added to perfumes, soaps, and detergents. Be sure to avoid anything that seems to cause a reaction in your child, and try to stick to “natural” scents in their normal concentrations.

sprinkle on a pleasant aromatic substance (like a dash of cinnamon or other spice, some pine needles or flower petals, etc.). Put the cotton ball in a plastic squeeze bottle, place the opening near your child’s nose, and give the bottle a gentle squeeze. Make this game-like by having your child try to guess the scent. You may want to link the scents to breakfast.

A fun variation on this game is to offer your child a tiny taste of an appealing food or liquid (you can use an eyedropper). Whisper for her to sit up, keeping her eyes closed, and stick out her tongue. You’ll start to awaken her senses and her brain; her body will soon follow.

Read ‘Em Up

Bedtime reading is a wonderful routine: soothing and intimate. Morning reading can be *invigorating* and intimate. Aim for something short and sweet—poetry is excellent. Or, try a bit of an exciting story, with promises to finish it when your child is up and ready to go. Humor is especially successful.

Music is another wonderful waker. Experiment with something rousing like a march, soothing like New Age music, or complex like Bach. Help your child identify what music she likes best.

Let Tinkerbell Wake Them

A gradual brightening of light will waken most people easily, and sudden bright lights are effective—but jarring. Try this “light” touch on a

Eyeopeners!

dreary morning: Grab a flashlight and shine it on the ceiling of your child's darkened room. Move it in swirling patterns around the room. As you notice your child stirring, tell your child to wake up and try to catch Tink. As his eyes open, shine the light nearby and allow him to "capture" the fairy. Give him a turn with the flashlight as he heads to the bathroom.

Another visual waking game: Hold a picture or object near your child. Before she opens her eyes, whisper clues about what she'll see when she does. Can she guess? She'll have to open her eyes to check.

Early Bird Delay Tactics: ENCOURAGING YOUR CHILD TO SLEEP LATER

Many young children naturally wake early, especially in the spring and summer. These strategies may help your child—and you—squeeze in a few extra winks in the morning.

Prolong the Night

Keep your child's room dark longer by using room-darkening shades or drapes. (A nightlight can help a child tolerate sleeping with a closed door, if light from the hall is a problem.) Mask morning noises like singing birds or traffic with a white noise machine, fan, or tabletop fountain (all located out of your child's reach). Whenever possible, locate your child's room away from the street side of your home. Finally, cool temperatures promote better sleep, so take care not to overdress or over-cover your child. If, however, your child tends to kick off the covers and get cold, dress him in heavy sleepers during the winter and skip the blankets.

Adjust Bedtime

One major cause of early waking is too late a bedtime. Yes, too *late*. Overtired children tend to sleep more fitfully, and this pattern can become chronic. On the other hand, if your child is getting plenty of hours of



FUSSBUSTERS AT HOME

sleep, you may want to consider gradually shifting to a later bedtime and/or eliminating the afternoon nap.

Deal with Night-Wetting

If your child is still wetting at night (and a high percentage of preschoolers do), take steps to prevent nighttime discomfort. Absorbent pull-ups or continued use of diapers may help your child wait comfortably until morning. An older preschooler may also be able to take care of accidents himself. Lay out an easy change of clothing the night before, and provide a sleeping bag or extra bed to switch to. Many children can even be taught to pull off wet bedding and place it in a plastic hamper in their room. You may be able to get away with dealing with it in the morning and not having your sleep interrupted.

Prevent accidents by limiting fluids before bedtime, taking your child to the potty just before you retire (this works very well for many children), setting your alarm to take the child once during the night, or even providing a potty chair next to the child's bed (many cannot hold off long enough to actually get to the bathroom once they notice they have to go).

Hunger Pangs

Young children can be awakened by hunger. Some can be helped by having a light snack just before going to bed at night. High-protein, high-tryptophan foods like milk, tuna, and turkey may promote falling asleep and stave off hunger longer.

Snooze Buttons:

KEEPING YOUR WIDE-AWAKE CHILD FROM WAKING YOU

The following tips may not prevent your child from waking at the crack of dawn, but they might help her stay in her room or bed long enough to give you a better rest. These tactics can be especially useful on weekends

Eyeopeners!

and holidays. Don't forget that you can combine strategies—such as Time Tellers *plus* So Much to Do.

Morning Companions

“Company” may keep your child in his room longer by preventing fear, boredom, or loneliness when your child wakes early. Possible buddies include siblings (many children *like* sharing rooms or at least visiting one another); an audiotape (get a child's tape player ready the night before and have your child practice pressing the “play” button); and stuffed animals or imaginary friends. At bedtime, remind your child what to do when she awakes.

Time Tellers

Most three- and four-year-olds cannot learn to tell time. However, once your child knows numerals, use electrical or duct tape to cover the minute display on a digital clock in your child's room. Post a *large* sign showing the acceptable numerals (whatever is okay with you) for getting out of bed. (You may want a different sign for weekends.) On an analog clock, use paint, glass markers, or cellophane to mark off a pie-shaped wedge from the center of the clock to the appropriate numerals. If the *little* hand is in that area, your child can get up. (Look for a clock where the minute hand is a different color or design from the hour hand—otherwise you can expect many false alarms.) You can also tell them to wait until they hear the shower running



SAFETY ZONE

Make sure your child knows safety rules before you allow him to roam the house by himself. He should know to stay inside, to avoid poisonous or dangerous objects, not to use the phone, and not to engage in risky play like climbing. Five- and six-year-olds can often handle the responsibility; most threes and fours cannot.

FUSSBUSTERS AT HOME

or smell the coffee brewing. Or, if you want your child up by a certain time, set an alarm to go off when she *can* get up.

So Much to Do

Make a picture list of things your child must do *before* she wakes you in the morning. Possible activities include going to the bathroom, singing certain songs, drawing a picture, feeding a pet, doing “exercises,” listening to a tape, looking at a stack of books, brushing hair, building a block tower, doing five puzzles, and practicing an emerging skill (like writing her name). The specific activities matter less than the time they take, so be flexible and creative. Be sure the skills are not too difficult or unpleasant.

Breakfast-in-Bedroom

Another option for weekends or special occasions. Leave a juice box and a breakfast bar or similar “snack” breakfast out for your child to eat when she gets up. For clean-up ease, serve the meal on a waterproof picnic cloth. Play this up as a special treat for your child (or better yet, children) to increase chances of success. We found this method bought an extra half-hour of sleep on holiday mornings.

Holding Pens

If you want your child to wait in his room, try setting out a container of special toys to play with only in the morning. Rotate these frequently, and be sure they are quiet, high-appeal toys. Or, if your child needs to be near you, create a special place just outside your room where he can wait. A sleeping bag or cushion can be enough to create a welcoming spot. If you have a well-child-proofed room in your house, you can also allow your child to wait there.

Eyeopeners!**The Pot Stop:
TO THE BATHROOM, ROBIN!**

The downside of toilet training is that the bathroom traffic jams get worse than ever. And if the bathroom becomes a morning battle zone on top of that, you may find yourself longing for the good old diaper days. So, here are ideas to reduce the problems you face with your child's morning toilette without returning to Huggies.

Toilet Taming

Most preschoolers will need to use the toilet urgently if they are staying dry at night. Encourage sleepy boys to aim accurately by floating a square of toilet paper in the bowl for them to sink. Little girls may need to remove panties or pajama bottoms so that they can spread their knees and lean forward—when they need to go badly, their urine may shoot out of the toilet unless they adjust their posture.

Even if your child is not yet dry at night, you should still take him to the bathroom upon waking to get cleaned up and try to use the toilet. (This also helps discourage children from wetting simply because it's easier.) Encourage a wet child to handle as much of the cleanup himself as possible. Most preschoolers can remove their wet disposable diapers and pull-ups and dispose of them (though they may not want to). I once knew a two-year-old who changed his own diapers. Kids can also put soiled laundry in a hamper or by the washing machine.

Clean Hand Club

Hand washing should be automatic after your child uses the toilet or gets changed. Make it game-like to encourage cooperation. Sing while your child scrubs, wash together, or draw a face on her hand with a washable marker and

FUSSBUSTERS AT HOME

have your child quickly soap it away. Sing the ABC song to make sure your child scrubs long enough.

Habit Forming

Most of the time, a consistent routine and simple praise will be sufficient to establish good toilet habits. Slow wakers, oppositional children, or those who are simply less regular by temperament may need additional support. Here are some tried and true strategies:

- **Sticker Charts** Keep these simple. A plain piece of paper stuck on the wall is sufficient. Offer a small reward for achieving goals (e.g., for every five stickers earned, your child gets to play an extra game with you or choose dessert that night.)
- **Game Theory** Races, competitions (“I’ll bet I can wash longer than you can”), trails to follow from bed-to-toilet-to-sink, songs, and silliness will enlist cooperation.
- **It’s the Rule** This is good for children who never “feel” like doing things. “Even if you don’t feel like you have to go potty, it’s the rule that you try when you wake up.” (Run the water when he tries to help get his plumbing flowing, too!)
- **Peer Pressure** Older children can serve as models, as well as offer rewards (such as playing with their toys) that trump anything you have to offer.

To Tell the Tooth: TOOTHBRUSH TIPS AND TIMERS

Even little kids need to take care of their chompers, because dental problems in baby teeth can lead to even more serious ones in the permanent teeth. Most preschoolers are proud of their teeth, but they may have trouble

Eyeopeners!

with the mechanics and habits needed to keep them pearly white. These ideas will help your child put his best smile forward.

Tips

- Brush teeth during the first potty stop rather than waiting until after breakfast. After breakfast, it's too tempting to skip it if you are in a rush.
- Or, keep an extra toothbrush and tube of toothpaste by the kitchen sink for ease.
- Make a clay model of the right amount of toothpaste (the size of a pea or less). Glue it to a piece of cardboard and position the "artwork" at child height for easy comparison.
- Teach an order for brushing teeth—e.g., top outsides, top insides, top flats (and same for the bottoms)—so that your child will get all surfaces. Use the same order when you help your child brush so it becomes a habit.
- Show your child how to bite down a little to brush the back outsides of her teeth and how to open extra wide and angle the brush for doing the middle insides.
- Most preschoolers cannot brush their teeth adequately by themselves. I usually helped at night but let them do it alone at other times to encourage self-sufficiency.
- A child-height mirror, especially a magnifying or fish-eye mirror (get one in the auto supply department), will encourage interest in the activity and help your child find all his teeth.

Timers

Two minutes—really, and yes, it does feel like forever—is recommended by most dentists. Even if you don't always make it that long, using a timer will usually increase brushing time—and with luck reduce time (and money) spent in the dentist chair.



FUSSBUSTERS AT HOME

- **Gamepiece Sand Timer** Hunt around for one that is two minutes. A one-minute timer done twice is fine, too. Some of the liquid timers are also good lengths.
- **Music** We used to sing Raffi's toothbrush song ("When you wake up in the morning and it's a quarter to one, and you want to have a little fun, you brush your teeth!"), but any song you can adapt to a two-minute length will do. It's easy to play around with lyrics to well-known songs and make them about brushing (e.g., "There was a tooth who had a friend and Brush was his name-o. B-R-U-S-H" ...and so on to the tune of "Bingo"). You can also make a tape consisting of a series of two-minute segments of songs, stories, noises, etc. Use a child's portable tape player to play a different segment each time.
- **Story Timer** Bring in a book of poetry or jokes. Read to your child for two straight minutes. Time is guaranteed to pass quickly!

Face Scrubbers: WASH UP WAKE UP

I have to admit that for years my usual method of washing my kids' faces was to ambush them with a wet paper towel when they least expected it. Eventually, though, I learned it was possible to make the process less of an ordeal—and even to transform it into a pleasant-ish experience. Try these ideas to elicit a little cooperation, if not enthusiasm, for the morning scrub-up. (And if these fail, lurk behind the doorway and grab your kid as she walks through.)

Washing Ways

Washcloths are difficult for many preschoolers to handle on their own, and water splashed from the basin is likely to go everywhere (yet still not manage to rinse away all the soap). Let your child try washing instead with cotton balls or pads. She'll enjoy noticing all the dirt that shows up so well

Eyeopeners!

against the white background. Use just a small dab of liquid soap or facial cleanser—too much soap is hard to rinse off. Another alternative is to have your child wet her face with a clean paintbrush (try a soft makeup brush). She can also apply soap with a shaving brush.

Most preschoolers do not need moisturizer on their faces, but a little petroleum jelly feels good on chapped lips in the winter.

Wash Your Mandible, Please

Direct your child to wash her face, part by part. Add extra pizzazz (and a cool educational component) by teaching her some fancy words for the facial parts. Introduce the vocabulary gradually, adding a new term every week or two. Pretend she is an artist and have her “paint” (with her washcloth) or “sculpt” the areas you name. You can also narrate the washing process when you do it for her.

- Lower jaw (including chin)—*mandible*
- Upper jaw and lip—*maxilla*
- The little indented place between the upper lip and nose—*filtrum*
- Holes in your nose—*nostrils*, or (really fancy) *nares*
- Nose—*nasal bone*
- Cheeks—*zygomatic bones* or *arch*
- Area around the eyes—*occipital area*
- Forehead—*frontal bones*
- Area beside eyes over to hairline—*temples*
- Eyebrow area—*superciliary arch*
- Back of the neck—*nape*
- Behind the ears—*behind the auricles*

You can also use this opportunity to teach names of facial parts in a second language, if you know one, or you can even make up your own silly names for each section.

Facial Fancies

Groggy children may also enjoy a pretend facial that you give them. Place a slightly warm washcloth over your child’s upturned face. After



FUSSBUSTERS AT HOME

a few seconds, remove it, add soap and gently “exfoliate” each area while talking in a soothing voice and complimenting your child’s “complexion.” Pat dry and finish with moisturizing smoochies.

Robo-Valet: **DRESSING-SQUABBLE SQUASHERS**

Choose clothes for your preschooler that he can manage alone. Elastic waists, pullover tops, colors that mix and match, and inexpensive play clothes that can get tossed in the washing machine are best for children of both genders. Teach one step and one garment at a time. For example, you can pull your child’s shirt over his head and then ask him to slip his arms in the sleeves himself. Don’t forget to budget extra time in the morning once he starts dressing independently.

Robo-Valet

When you do need to help your child get dressed, boost cooperation by letting a robot take charge. Use a choppy robot voice to direct your child while you dress him. “Time-for-your-shirt. Lift-your-arms. Poke-them-into-your-sleeves,” and so on. The robot can tell the child to do certain parts of the process himself as well, or even simply narrate the steps of the process, offering suggestions as needed. Occasionally, the robot can give some silly directions, like “Put-your-sneakers-on-your-ears,” to add humor to an often crabby situation.

Other theme approaches to assisting and/or narrating the dressing process include:

- British valet
- Backstage dresser (This is good when you are in a rush.)
- Astronaut (Pretend your child is putting on components of a space suit.)
- Puppet (It is amazing what children will do for a puppet with a silly voice.)
- Drill sergeant (I like this when *I* feel crabby and demanding.)

Eyeopeners!

- Fairy godmother (Perhaps she has a broken wand, so she has to work her magic manually.)
- Sales clerk or dress designer (“You look mah-velous!”)
- Pro athlete locker room attendant, helping to suit up for the big game

Feel free to pretend that your child’s clothes are something other than what they are. Many preschoolers will be delighted to head off to playgroup in an imaginary police officer’s uniform, Cinderella’s ball gown, or Tarzan’s leopard skins.

Into the Phone Booth, Clark Kent

Distractible kids may dawdle less if they are away from their toys, the telly, etc. Try popping them in the closet where they can transform into Superman (incognito in his jeans and T-shirt). Hand them their clothes, saying, “Quick Clark Kent! Into this phone booth! We need Superman immediately! Bad guys are coming!” Another trick is to throw a blanket over your kid. Pretend it’s a magician’s hanky, say the magic words, and (pause a minute) *poof!* He’s dressed! And if that isn’t magic, I don’t know what is.

Code Blue Days

I wish I had heard of this method when my kids were small. Instead of sorting your child’s clothes by type (i.e., socks in one drawer, shirts in another), arrange them by outfit—and bag the outfits in grocery sacks or clip them together with clothespins. No hunting around for socks at the last minute and no cringing when your child shows up wearing the green striped pants with the orange plaid shirt. And *one* dumped-out drawer—*max*—to clean up!

Place each set in color-coded drawers (stick a color dot on the drawer front). Use different colors for different types of outfits (e.g., warm vs. cool weather, play clothes vs. dressy clothes, etc.). Tell your child it’s a code blue day, and then let her choose which code blue set to wear!

FUSSBUSTERS AT HOME

Capes Go with Everything!

COPING WITH CLOTHING FETISHES

Many parents of preschoolers report that their biggest battles occur when their children insist on wearing inappropriate clothing.



TRY THIS!

If you are going to battle over clothes (and you probably will), at least shift the battles to the evening, so you don't have to be fighting when you're frantically getting ready for work. The rule in our house was that children could choose their own outfits—if they did so during the evening. If they waited for morning, they had to wear what we selected. Naturally, we reserved a last-minute veto, in case the weather or plans for the day changed. For best results, select items for every category, from underpants to barrettes.

brief period each day, gradually lengthening the time he wears them.

- **Let natural consequences prevail.** If it isn't a major health risk, allow your child to make a mistake and learn for himself that it's not a good idea to wear his snowsuit to the kiddy pool.

Unseasonable Duds

This issue crops up most frequently during transitional weather. To avoid conflict, try these approaches:

- **Let the thermometer decide.** Make a picture chart of appropriate clothes for different temperatures. Then simply check the outside thermometer or the forecast.

- **Compromise.** She can wear her bikini in January—but she has to wear pants and a shirt over it.

- **Acclimate gradually.** Some children need to get used to the feel of air on their arms and legs again after a winter of being covered (and vice versa). Push sleeves and pant legs up or down a little each day or opt for mid-length clothes. Or, have your child wear the new clothes for a

Eyeopeners!

Costumes and Strange Outfits

This was a major issue in my family!

- **Designate costume days.** Or times of day. Perhaps he can be a fireman every evening, but he has to wear other clothes to school and friends' houses.
- **Remove the offending items.** Parents can make things disappear. This technique will undoubtedly cause tears in the short run, but most kids recover quickly.
- **Live with it.** You may feel embarrassed, but most people find it charming when your daughter goes shopping with you in her fairy princess dress. (My oldest was Peter Pan every day for the better part of a year and my daughter wore her Halloween dog costume for longer than I care to admit. She also barked.) Perhaps you can stomach letting your kid wear a portion of the costume most of the time. As my son explained once, "Capes go with *everything!*" (Just beware of potentially dangerous items, like high heels or items that tie around the neck. We fastened capes with small pieces of Velcro for quick release.)



LITERATURE LINKS

There are two great books for kids with strong clothing preferences. For younger children, search out *Red Is Best* by Kathy Stinson. It's a tiny, hard-to-find book but worth the hunt. Older preschoolers will enjoy Lotta's reaction to her sweater, which tickles and scratches, and her preference for her Sunday-best velvet dress in *Lotta on Troublemaker Street* by Astrid Lindgren.

Insistence on Sameness

Some children have to wear the same item or outfit day after day or in inappropriate situations (such as to bed or in the bath).

- **Go along.** These are usually short phases. It really won't harm your child to wear the same shirt every day for a week or those too-short pants. If it looks to be a long phase, try to buy multi-

FUSSBUSTERS AT HOME

ples of the desired item and just keep telling the disapproving neighbors that your child actually owns five identical skirts. Or, allow her to carry her favorite tights in a backpack when she's not wearing them.

- ***Involve your child in choosing new clothes.*** Try to identify the key features of favorite clothes (usually size/tightness, color, texture, or emotional association). Take him shopping and buy what he likes, even if you don't like it. Also, look for hand-me-downs (or as my son called them, "handy downs") or used clothing. Many children prefer these for their softness and/or associations.

Hair Doozies: UNTANGLING HAIR-DO DON'TS

I, for one, am very grateful whenever buzz cuts are "in" for boys. If only girls would decide they were stylish, too! When you can't go for the Michael Jordan look, try these techniques to minimize tangle terrors.

Distract

Do hair while your child is busy with something else. For a time, we had a no-morning-TV rule—except during hair-dos (not entirely satisfactory, since it then meant that we had to devote half an hour to doing hair). Also try letting your child play with play dough, Legos, water in the sink, or some other absorbing (but stationary) material while you comb and style. Or pretend your child is a champion poodle being groomed or that her head is a dinosaur fossil dig site—who knows what you'll find under all those curls? (This last technique is especially useful when your child comes home from preschool with one of those charming letters informing you that one of her classmates has lice.)

Involve

Help your child enjoy the sensory pleasures of having his hair done. Put on some slow music, seat him on some cushions or a child's chair so

Eyeopeners!

that his head is just above your knees. Provide a hand mirror so he can study his reflection. Talk about how wonderfully soft/thick/smooth, curly/straight, etc., his hair is as you comb or brush it with slow, gentle strokes. Periodically look at hairstyles in magazines and experiment with new looks. Try small amounts of hair care products (look for ones formulated for children) or cool new accessories. Let him do the final styling, even if he needs your touch first to get all the tangles out or the part straight.

Simplify and Soothe

Some preschoolers have exceptionally tender scalps. These are often the children who are more sensitive about everything, from food tastes and smells to the seams in their socks. Typically these children cannot be distracted and do not enjoy the hair care process, no matter how hard you try to make it pleasant. For these children, swallow your dreams of long curls, and let them keep their hair as short as possible. Avoid styles requiring hair accessories like barrettes or ponytail holders—they will pull and bother (and your child will remove them at her first opportunity). Restrain growing-out bangs with a little gel or mousse instead of clips. Use a baseball cap to keep hair out of her face during vigorous play.

Get the softest brush that will go through your child's hair (ones designed for babies are often best). Save combs (wide-toothed) for wet hair and quick parts. Brush hair in sections, lifting it so you don't tug on her scalp and slowly work out tangles from the bottom up. Spray detan- glers work well for some children, even on dry hair. A quick mist with warm water reduces static and sometimes minimizes tangles, too. Finally, some children are bothered less if they do the de-tangling (but most preschoolers take forever and cannot do a thorough job).

Help desensitize scalps by playing with your child's hair when she is relaxing. Give her gentle scalp massages, making small circles all over her head with your fingertips. Grasp sections of her hair close to her scalp and tug gently. Give her "head scritchies" as you would a pet and encourage her to nuzzle against you.

**FUSSBUSTERS AT HOME****Skills Seminar:
A DO-IT-MYSELF OUTERWEAR OVERVIEW**

You'll be relieved when your child learns how to get all those outer garments on all by himself, won't you? The best thing is your child will be delighted, too! These tips really work—I've seen them in action in school settings with kids of all levels of coordination and motivation.

Putting on a Jacket

All preschool teachers love this trick—and so do all independent-minded preschoolers. Teach your child these do-it-himself steps:

1. Put your jacket on the floor, zipper-side up. Kneel or stand with your toes by the hood (or neck), facing your jacket.
2. Bend over and put your arms part way into the sleeves. It will look like you are going to put on your jacket backwards and upside down.
3. Stand up and flip your coat over your head! Raise your arms and let your hands slide to the ends of your sleeves. You did it!

Most three-year-olds can master this task. The most common error is starting from the bottom. (The jacket will then be on upside down.) To help your kid remember the steps, have him recite the following rhyme:

*My hood's by my toes,
My hands in the sleeves.
I stand up and flip!
Right on it goes!*

Another option is to have him drape his coat, front open, over a low chair. He sits down, slips his arms into the sleeves, and shrugs it on.

Gloves and Mittens

- Mittens are usually better than gloves because they keep small fingers warmer and are easier to put on. Check to be sure the

Eyeopeners!

thumbs are in the thumb place.

- If your child insists on gloves, shop for ones that are easy to manage. To get the fingers sorted out, have your child pretend they are trains, heading into their berths at the roundhouse or little bunnies crawling into their burrows. You can also sing, “Where is Thumbkin?” (but start with “Pointer” and do “Thumbkin” last). Be patient—gloves take concentration.
- For snow play, your child should put on her mittens *before* the jacket, so they will already be tucked into the sleeves.

Snowsuitable

First of all, don’t put on a snowsuit if you don’t have to. If you are driving and just scooting a short distance from the car to the door, you can even skip boots. But if you’re walking or going on a snowy romp, take a deep breath and get to work.

- First have your child go potty!
- Show your child how to hold her shirt sleeves in her fist as she slides on her jacket, and tuck pants legs into socks before she puts on her snowpants.
- Set up snowpants firefighter-style. Hold them by the waist, then collapse them so that the waist is centered over the two foot holes. Now your child can simply step in and pull them up.
- Offer an assortment of hats. Have a mirror handy—preschoolers are much more likely to put on a hat when they can watch themselves in the mirror. Develop a silly hat-talk ritual, like repeating the lines from *Go, Dog! Go!* by P.D. Eastman. (Your child asks, “Hello again. Do you like my hat?” You respond “I do! What a hat! I like it! I like that party hat!”)



SAFETY ZONE

Remove all cords from hoods or hats (cords pose a strangulation hazard).



FUSSBUSTERS AT HOME

Anticipate Undressing

Walk your child through what she should do with clothes she removes. Also, lay out old towels or rugs from the outside door to the bathroom before going out to play. Five minutes after everyone is dressed, someone is bound to have to go potty, even if you followed the first tip.

Boot Camp

I suspect that calling an ordeal “boot camp” came not from the military, but from someone with experience dressing preschoolers for outdoor play. Try these tips to make the struggle easier:

- To get boots on the correct feet, use an indelible marker to make a design on the inside edges of each boot. If the marks touch, your child knows she has them the right way.
- If you buy boots with liners, your child may find it easier to put the liners on first.
- To help your child get her foot into a tight boot, have her sit on the floor with her back against the wall. On three, she should push her *heel* toward you, as if she were trying to push you over. (You hold the boot firmly in place.) Or have her stand in front of you, with her foot partly inserted in the boot. On three, have her stomp down hard, while you provide resistance. If all else fails, let her be Cinderella. You get to be Prince Charming. How can she prove she is Cinderella? Why, by getting her foot into that glass galosh, of course.
- Keep boots near a radiator or heating vent. Warm boots are much more inviting.
- Make a “boot gnome” from an old-fashioned clothespin to keep mates together.

Eyeopeners!

Howdy Do, Dee: WELCOMING RITUALS

Helping your child develop a friendly ritual for greeting caregivers will ease separation anxieties. These routines give structure and predictability to the change—and help your child to feel in control of the situation. The following hello games will feel good for everyone:

Great Shakes!

Help your preschooler develop a tricky handshake to do with his caregiver (he can have a different one for each caregiver). An example: Slap five, up high, down low, spin, double clap, wiggle fingers at each other. (Watch the remade version of *The Parent Trap* if you need help visualizing this kind of handshake.) You and your child can probably come up with a great variety of ideas that suit his temperament. For example, stick in some hugging and kissing for kids who need cuddles; whispers and soft tickles for quiet sorts; and jumps, squeezes, and spin-arounds for kids who need an active hello.

We Are Glad to Sing You!

Many preschools begin their days with a welcoming song. Songs work well on an individual basis, too. Here is a good greeting song (or chant), based on one from my Girl Scout days:

Hello, bello, bello, bello!
I am glad to see you!
I am glad to greet you!
Hello, bello, bello, HELLO!



Of course, your child's choice of songs doesn't have to have anything to do with saying hello. What's important is the consistent performance of the ritual.

Butler Duty

Some children like to have a job at greeting time, especially one that will give them some back-and-forth contact before they settle in. Your child



FUSSBUSTERS AT HOME

may like to take the wraps for arriving caregivers or stand near the door (with an adult) to act as greeter for other arrivals at school or daycare. Other errands and tasks will work, too.

Sign Language

“Hello” is signed in American Sign Language with a salute. Show your child how to hold up the “I love you” sign, too: Palm out, extend the thumb and hold up the pointer and pinky fingers (tall man and ring man fold down). This silent greeting works well with shy kids, who may need a few minutes before they’re ready to speak out loud around a newcomer.

Bye and Seek: TRANSITION INTO A GAME

You will find that your child is more accepting of your departure when he is actively involved in a game as you leave. You’ll feel better, too, when your child is happy and busy.

Where’s Waldo?

Hide a stuffed animal or other toy before you say good-bye (I recommend using the same one or two each time). Give your child a clue or two about where to find it. Let him start searching with the sitter before you leave. (You might want to tell the caregiver where it is so you don’t get a frantic call at work.) Your child can continue to play the game with the caregiver—and he can hide the stuffed animal for you to find upon your return.

Bye and Seek

Let your child hide as the caregiver arrives. Have a ritual for finding her. For example, the sitter might hunt for a minute or two, then wave a magic wand and say, “Abracadabra!” and have your child pop out. Or, you might give the sitter “warmer, colder” clues until she finds her. For safety reasons, just make sure your child is found before you go.

Eyeopeners!

Guess Who?

While you are getting ready to leave, help your child pick a character from a nursery rhyme, book, video, or TV show. Help him think of three clues to give the sitter. For example, for Curious George your child might say, "I'm a monkey. I live with the Man with the Yellow Hat. I'm always getting in trouble. Guess who I am?" Let the sitter engage your child with another "Guess Who?" game or read the appropriate book as you wave good-bye and scoot out the door.

Can You Do It?

Assign your child a task to learn while you are gone, like whistling, snapping his fingers, hopping all the way from the front door to the kitchen, or whatever. Aim for something he is close to being able to do, so he has a good chance of success by the time you get home. Get him started practicing just before you go. Don't forget to have him demonstrate when you return.

More Ideas

Have an activity ready for your child and his caregiver to do. Your child can help you plan if he'd like. Suggestions:

- Puzzles or board games
- An art project
- A cooking project
- A science experiment
- Blocks to build
- A walk to take
- A visit from a friend (if the sitter doesn't mind)
- Swing
- Dance
- Peg board or marble run
- A treasure hunt

FUSSBUSTERS AT HOME

End of the Rode: SHARING A MINI-COMMUTE

When my brother was small, he loved to “go to work” with our dad. Most weekday mornings, he put on his tie and Daddy-jacket (a white shirt that my mom had embroidered his name on so it resembled my father’s lab coat), grabbed his briefcase (a yellow scrub bucket), and drove to work with Dad. What this meant was they got in the car together, and my dad drove from the garage to the end of the driveway. He put the car in park, helped my brother hop out, and watched until he walked up to the door of his “office” (our house), and my mom let him in.

This ritual was deeply satisfying for my brother. My dad reports that they had many nice conversations during these short commutes. Undoubtedly, the ritual added as much as ten minutes to his morning departure some days (Evan wasn’t always a speedy dresser and sometimes their conversations were lengthy), but for the few years it lasted, it was well worth

the investment in their relationship.



TALES FROM THE TRENCHES

My five-year-old daughter was once asked what her father’s job was. She thought for a moment, then looked at me, uncertain. I prodded her to answer, saying, “Remember, you’ve visited daddy at his office. What does he do all day?” “Oh yes!” she said enthusiastically. “He types!” (Her father is a lawyer.)

Look for ways for your child to share a piece of your commute. She may be able to walk to the bus or subway stop with you (and another parent, older sibling, or sitter to walk her home), share a journey down the driveway, or simply stand and watch for your car pool with you. Use the moments to share information about what you do at your job (not that your child will necessarily get it) and to ask about her activities.

A costume and props related to your job can enrich the experience for your child, as they did for my brother. They can also stimulate imaginative play that distracts her as she completes her separation from you.

Eyeopeners!

Blast Off Together! READY ON THE LAUNCH PAD

When the whole family is heading off in the morning to work, daycare, school, or errands, you'll need to be a little extra organized and prepared. That way you won't have to do lots of last-minute running around looking for missing sneakers or the particular tutu your daughter must have for dance class. Or lecturing and screaming, which is what comes next in my house. The other key to reducing out-the-door fusses is a blast-off attitude, which is easier to adopt once you're organized properly. These ideas may help your family to launch into the day more peacefully.

The Launching Pad

Create a central place to store *everything* family members will need as they go out the door. If at all possible, aim for setting up a "cubby" area, such as those daycare centers and preschools use.

- Be sure that hooks and shelves are at child height, so your child can be independent.
- One easy way to make a cubby is to separate a small bookcase into sections with baskets or boxes. (Closet organizing systems work well, too.) Attach hooks to the side for children's jackets. Use a small basket (or clothespins mounted to the uprights) to hold hats and mittens. Place boots on a tray or an old towel or carpet remnant on the bottom shelf.
- If your child insists on just dumping everything, try a laundry basket or large box (stow footwear on a mat beside it).
- Papers, toys, snacks, supplies, etc., for the next day can be stored right in backpacks and hung on a hook or placed on a shelf. Or you could use a rural-style mailbox, personalized with your child's name; a plastic dishpan; an empty cereal box, covered with contact paper and decorated to your child's taste (tape it to whatever you use for a cubby); or an in/out box from an office supply store.

FUSSBUSTERS AT HOME

- Use separate backpacks or totes for each activity and restock them right after use. We were constantly heading off to soccer without clean socks until I realized it was better to buy two pairs and pop the clean one in the soccer bag as soon as we got home from practice or the game. I put clean uniform items in the bag as soon as they're washed, too, so I know where to find them. If there is



TRY THIS!

Have special clothes for an activity that need to be washed each time? Have your child get in the habit of sticking them on the washing machine when she removes them. That way, you'll be reminded to do them when you put in a load—and if you don't get to them in time, at least they'll have aired out and you'll be able to find them.

something that can't go in the bag until the last minute (like perishable food), attach a note or other visual reminder to the outside of the bag.

- Use visual checklists and hang them on the door to check each time you leave. Something you always forget? Make a *big* picture of it, and stick it at eye level.
- Mount a dry-erase calendar or large paper calendar near the launching pad. Use markers color-coded for each family member so you can see quickly who has appointments. (Let your child cross off the previous day—that's a chore a preschooler will relish.)
- Place an outdoor thermometer in a window near the launching pad to help moderate outdoor clothing disputes.
- Each night, check to be sure that all items needed for the next day are in the appropriate pack or basket.

Out-the-Door Approaches

Set an alarm or timer to go off when it's time to start last-second preparations, such as gathering packs or putting on coats. (Be sure to allow a few minutes breathing room.) Then try one of these "Let's Go!" approaches:

Eyeopeners!

- **Stepping Out** Divide the task into a series of steps (e.g., Step One is go potty, Step Two is put on your coat and other gear, etc.). Then you can call out each step, drill sergeant style, with a one- or two-word description, like “Potty!” or “Coat!” This terse approach often cuts down on crabby lectures and fussy arguments.
- **Fire Drill** Pretend you’re firefighters scrambling to get on the hook and ladder and to the fire. Your kid can imagine that his pack is firefighting equipment, like a hose or ax. From time to time, have your child be the Fire Chief, so you don’t always get stuck being the ordering-around guy, and so he learns the routine, too. Other imaginative themes (like space launch, of course) work, too, as long as there is an element of urgency.
- **Last One Out Is a Rotten Egg!** I hate this one, since it leads to bickering among the kids, but I must admit it is remarkably effective in getting everyone together quickly (as long as I do a double check once we’re in the car to make sure we have everything). And I don’t have to do the yelling, and I like that better.
- **Final Check** Make a list of everything you need to have or do, including buckling up. Then get the list laminated and keep it in the car. If it’s a picture list, your child can call out each item. Then do a countdown and blast off to have a great day!

Time Machines and Other Safety Seat Lures: BUCKLE UP FOR SAFETY STRATEGIES

Getting your kid in his safety seat and buckled up can be one of the most maddening steps of the morning rush. *But never skip this step no matter how big your hurry!* I’ve seen kids with serious brain injuries from very minor accidents (one was in a parking lot). Teach your child to do as much of the process herself as possible. This will make life easier for you and decrease power struggles. Practice with the straps and buckles when you’re not in a rush. Finally, the following imaginary themes can greatly increase your child’s cooperation (just vary the theme so it doesn’t get



FUSSBUSTERS AT HOME

dull). And, trust me, it's better than using your knee to force a struggling kid into her seat.

Time Machine Maneuvers

Invite your child to hop in, saying something like, "You like dinosaurs, right? Well, hop in my new time machine, and we'll head back millions of years, so you can see some. What dinosaurs would you most like to see?" Continue to play up the dinosaur theme. Or pick another time destination your child might enjoy. An old remote control or broken cordless phone makes a good prop for this game. Naturally, it would be very dangerous to travel through time unrestrained, so be sure your youngster secures her time-warp webbing before you begin.

Magic Carpet Magic

Your three-year-old may cheerfully bind herself safely to your magic carpet with strands of pearls or gold chains. Be sure to allow her to use the magic words ("Open, sesame!") to make the door to the cave (car) open, as well as the magic words that will start you on your journey: "Abracadabra, peanut butter sandwich! Fly, magic carpet! Fly!" During your journey, narrate the wondrous sights you are passing. Encourage your child to join in. Say things like "Look! I see an elephant lumbering along the trail. I wonder if it is carrying the Rajah to the castle over there. Are those rubies or diamonds on the elephant's headpiece?"

Flight Attendant

Invite your child to settle in comfortably aboard the Concorde and run through the in-flight safety instructions, including information on fastening her seatbelt and remaining seated until you are parked at the gate at the other end. Let her know your destination, any interesting sights you'll see, and approximate time of arrival. Magazines and in-flight snacks will naturally be appreciated on longer journeys.

Other imaginary transportation themes that preschoolers love include:

- Police Officer (Use some good siren sound effects.)

Eyeopeners!

- Super Heroes (Fly or ride in a super-powered vehicle.)
- Army Guys (Ever feel like driving a tank to work? Here's your chance.)
- Animal Play (horse loaded in a trailer, puppy in a crate, riding on a wild stallion, etc.)
- Pilot (commercial jet, helicopter, Air Force stealth bomber, hot air balloon, etc.)
- Fantastic Creature Transport (back of a dragon, unicorn, Pegasus, etc.)
- Submarine or Pirate Ship

Static Guard: HELP FOR THOSE UNSIGHTLY CLING-ONS

Separation anxiety and the resulting clinginess usually peak during the toddler years. Nonetheless, many preschoolers will periodically struggle with separations, and a handful will continue to have consistent difficulty. In extreme cases, you may need to seek professional help, but these strategies have helped ease good-bye grab-ons in many families.

Rule Number One: *Keep Good-byes Short and Sweet and Ritualized.*

If this represents a major change for your family, have a meeting to *tell* your child the new routine. Make a picture diagram of the steps, and keep the steps to four or fewer. An example:

Step One: Mrs. Williams arrives at 7:30.

Step Two: You tell her your new joke.

Step Three: I give you my piggy pin and you give me an action figure.

Step Four: At 7:40, we have our special hug and kiss, and I get in the car.

In my family, we always say last thing, "*Hey! Let's be careful out there.*" (Remember *Hill Street Blues?*) When my kids hear that (or say it, if they're leaving me), they know the good-byes are over. Make sure you have a "closer" too.



FUSSBUSTERS AT HOME

For the next two weeks, follow the good-bye routine, including the timing, *exactly*. Once your child feels more confident, you can develop Plan B or C patterns for mornings that go differently.

Collateral and Tokens of Affection

Remember those cute heart necklaces that split in two, so you and your best friend could each wear half? Or ID bracelets, fraternity pins, engagement and wedding rings? Giving a loved one a token to remember you by has been a tradition since before the days of knights when ladies gave a scarf to their shining-armored sweethearts. Choose something to exchange with your child. My son and I wore these cute little piggy pins on school days when he was three-and-a-half and suddenly developed an urge to stay with his pregnant mother. The little piggy pins solved the problem to his satisfaction and mine. Another friend of mine used to give her son a “credit card” (which was really an expired video store card, but the kid couldn’t read) every day when she went to work. He tucked it in his pocket and rubbed the raised lettering when he missed her. Occasionally he used it to charge goods at the daycare play store, so it came in handy, too.

Humor Helpers

As always, be a little careful with humor in emotionally charged situations. It’s a magic bullet for some kids but a dagger in the heart for sensitive ones.

Do something like walk your kid into his classroom. Then pretend to flush a toilet. Your child can get swirled down the drain and shoot through the sewer to land where his friends are playing. Or maybe your child would prefer to flush *you* down the drain. Or, pretend the kid’s a baseball, and slug him over the fence. Make believe he’s a sack of moldy old potatoes you’re unloading, and pick him up and dump him in the block corner with his buddies. Goofy stuff, but it lets your child (or maybe you) express a little of that aggression/frustration safely and the slightly violent separation may be just a bit easier, like ripping off a bandage instead of gently trying to work it off. *Final Warning: Do not sneak out on your child. Ever!*