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KIDS AND HABITS: A LOVE STORY

WHY THEY'RE HELPFUL, WHEN THEY'RE NOT, AND HOW TO TELL THE DIFFERENCE AND MAKE CHANGE

BY KATE ROPE

MELANIE LASOFF LEVS HAD A PLAN TO HELP HER son Jordan—who was approaching age 2—give up his pacifier before starting preschool. After finding the idea on the internet, she created what she called “an elaborate ritual that would involve several helium balloons that would float it up to the ‘paci fairy.’” She gathered her husband, Josh; their 5-year-old; and Jordan outside for the ceremony. On the first try, the paci fell to the earth with a clunk (not enough balloons). Josh ran out for more, while Levs, now a mom to three in Atlanta, “freaked out.” The baby sat on the ground with “no idea what was going on,” she recalls. On the second try, the paci took to the sky—while the family yelled exuberantly, “Bye, bye, paci!”—and then promptly got stuck in

a tree. Levs quickly ushered everyone inside, telling Jordan, “Wow! What a big boy, no more paci!” At bedtime, Jordan cried “like his heart was shattered,” says Levs. And at 2 a.m., she caved and gave him the backup. He sucked that one for a year and a half more until giving it up with little drama.

Levs’s paci saga, which she now looks back on with humor, so perfectly demonstrates the unnecessarily fraught relationship parents have with their kids’ habits. The truth is that habits can be incredibly helpful coping mechanisms that ground children in their changing world, and most of the time we can let them run their course. Yes, there are times to intervene, but there are simpler, more effective ways to do so that don’t involve a call to the paci fairy or a trip to the party-supply store.

WHY HABITS AND ROUTINES ARE ANCHORS

SO MUCH OF WHAT HAPPENS IN THE LIFE OF YOUNG children is out of their control and unpredictable, which is why “it’s reassuring to have a habit that they have a say in,” says Susan Newman, a social psychol-





Plush toys, blankets and hearing the same bedtime story over and over again can bring predictability and order to a world that feels too big for a small child.

ogist and the author of *Little Things Long Remembered*. “It gives them some sense of power.” Routines also provide predictability. “When they know how things will go and what to expect, they don’t have to be as worried, especially during moments of saying goodbye to parents,” says Katie Hurley, a child and adolescent psychotherapist in El Segundo, Calif., and the author of *No More Mean Girls*. That’s why habits and rituals flare in times of uncertainty—when children first leave the house to go to day care or school or when they emerge from the “kindergarten bubble” and begin to hear about things that are “overwhelmingly scary, like terrorism or car accidents,” says Hurley. The habits and rituals they cling to in these moments are “ports in a storm of so much change.”

WHAT YOU CAN STOP WORRYING ABOUT

ON THE NO-BIG-DEAL LIST, FEEL FREE TO INCLUDE loveys (blankets, plush toys, one of Mommy’s T-shirts), thumb-sucking and pacifiers (unless your dentist raises any orthodontic issues when your child is around age 4) and other attachment

items that may seem odd but are harmless (one family shared that their daughter—with the blessing of their pediatrician—sleeps with an ice pack every night). “We are so socialized as parents to worry too much about that stuff,” says Hurley. But our concerns are more likely based on external pressures than developmental psychology. “Often the desire to get rid of the raggedy blanket your child clutches is parents giving into peer pressure or feeling embarrassed,” says Newman. It’s useful to realize that even adults reach for comfort objects and habits: reading at bedtime, watching TV, writing in a journal. “Very young children cope with discomfort by holding on to soft objects and sometimes sucking on them,” says Jessica Lahey, a former middle-school teacher and the author of *The Gift of Failure*. “Don’t ever take away a lovey. They remind them of love and of a time that feels easier.”

HOW TO KNOW WHEN TO CHANGE A HABIT

“WITH ANY KIND OF SELF-SOOTHING, THERE HAS TO BE balance,” says Emily Green, a child and family therapist in Atlanta. “Do we have this behavior we

4 STEPS TO HELPING YOUR KIDS MAKE A CHANGE

1. Pick your moment.

Don’t try to get rid of the pacifier when you have just moved to a new house or it’s the start of the school year. “Adults think of transitions as a great time to have a fresh start, but try to think about transitions from your kid’s point of view,” says Jessica Lahey, author of *The Gift of Failure*. You might tell him, “When you move into your big-boy bed, you won’t need your pacifier anymore,” but the pacifier may be exactly what he needs to weather that scary transition. And bring up the idea in moments of calm, when your child is not in need of self-soothing.

2. Help them understand what’s happening.

You can show your child you understand his emotions and help him understand his own by narrating what you see, says child and family therapist Emily Green. “You might say something like, ‘It seems like when you’re worried, you’re sucking your thumb a lot,’ ‘Seems like when you get anxious you pick your skin and you zone out and your body relaxes,’ or ‘Seems like your paci helps you feel a

whole lot calmer.’” That enables both of you to connect to what’s behind the habit, which will help you find an alternative.

3. Introduce them to other coping strategies.

“Kids have a habit fixation because it’s the only thing they know how to do,” says psychotherapist Katie Hurley. It’s our job to help them discover and develop healthy coping strategies, such

as deep breathing or squeezing Play-Doh. “Even 4-year-olds can learn to use their breath to calm themselves,” says Hurley. “Teach them to blow up an imaginary balloon and to do it over and over again until they feel calm.” For older children (say, a middle schooler who’s trying to stop biting her nails), introduce progressive muscle relaxation—tensing and releasing the muscles of the body in succession, starting at the head and ending at the feet. Another effective strategy is teaching your child to have a dialogue with her “worry brain,” says Hurley. For instance, it can help her to say, “I know I can sleep tonight even if I can’t hear my special song, because

tomorrow I can listen to it.” Or “It’s OK that I didn’t eat my apples first. I can eat them later.”

4. Encourage your child’s efforts.

“When we focus on the behavior, we lose sight of the child and then reinforce the behavior we want them to pull away from,” says Green. “For instance, if a child is sucking her thumb and a well-meaning adult keeps saying, ‘Why are you sucking your thumb?’ it just raises their stress level.” That makes it harder for kids to change the habit. Instead, Green tells parents to “highlight, track and name when they are engaging in alternative self-soothing behavior, like, ‘Look at you using your breath to calm down!’”



can call upon to soothe ourselves, or does this behavior become a compulsion that we can't stop even if we wanted to?" Skin picking and hairpulling, which children often do in times of stress, can "take on lives of their own," says Green and can lead to potential health problems, such as infection and loss of hair growth. Green says it's time for parents to intervene when a habit becomes a health issue; is upsetting your child because of negative feedback in environments you can't control (such as school); is interfering with normal development (like small motor skills or speech); or "feels out of their control, and they don't feel like they have other options to handle stress."

FIND THE MEANING BEHIND BEHAVIOR

ALL THE RESEARCH INTO HABITS SHOWS ONE pretty clear outcome: to change a habit you don't want, you must replace it with another behavior you do. And that means figuring out what kind of benefit your child is getting out of the habit. "Anxiety and stress are climbing in kids, so we always say to parents that our biggest job is to think about the iceberg analogy," says Hurley. "When we see kids acting out or finding comfort in rituals, we need to ask, 'What is underneath that?'"

If it's the beginning of the school year, you probably have your answer. "If every single year of your life you had to change your job, have new co-workers, a new boss and new supplies, every single year you would be anxious," says Hurley. Rather than giving your child a big smile and telling her to "have a great day!" when she's clearly worried, Hurley recommends respecting her concerns and talking them through. Ask her what's hard, what's good. Talk through the difficult scenarios she is envisioning.

By discovering and acknowledging the sources of

Creating patterns, predictability and routines can be normal and healthy approaches to anxiety. Some kids may eat foods in a certain order or insist that the broccoli *never* touch the chicken.

your child's concern, you will help her manage the transition, build her resilience and lessen her need for habits and rituals to make it through. It will also help you come up with effective alternatives for managing her stress and anxiety.

HOW TO KNOW IF YOUR CHILD NEEDS PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

IT'S NOT UNCOMMON TO SEE PICTURES ON SOCIAL media of matchbox cars lined up by color or a plate of food with no item touching another, with a caption, "Is my kid totally OCD?" We associate this kind of patterned order with popular notions of obsessive-compulsive disorder. But the truth is that creating patterns, predictability and routine are normal approaches to anxiety. Just think about adults who clean to ease their stress levels. Kids might tap their fingers to match syllables or words in a conversation. Others might eat foods in a certain order (or insist that the broccoli *never* touch the chicken—which, let's be honest, makes perfect sense at a certain age). "When you see kids doing things like that, it's a calming technique that says, 'I'm in control of this,'" says Hurley. If you notice your child engaging in similar behaviors, it's an opportunity to find out what he is concerned about. But it does not mean your child has a diagnosable disorder.

"OCD is debilitating in young children and involves very specific rituals a child feels a compulsion to go through to cope with certain situations, such as getting out the door every morning," says Hurley.

"Normal phases of seeking order will tend to become less bothersome over time and won't disrupt the daily routine," says psychologist Seoka Salstrom, the owner of the Hanover Center for Cognitive Behavioral Therapies in New Hampshire. "OCD and anxiety behaviors tend to grow and become more elaborate and time consuming." Over the years, says Salstrom, "a lot of parents and kids have asked me, 'Is this normal, or is it clinical?' And I say, 'What I care the most about is, Is it working for you? Is it getting in the way of your learning or friendships or of being the person you want to be?'" If the answer is yes, you can find support and therapists for anxiety and OCD through the International OCD Foundation and the Anxiety and Depression Association of America.

Short of those kinds of situations, however, your best option may be simply to watch. Happy children with a habit or a quirk are still happy children. Sometimes the habits are part of what got them there. □

4 STEPS TO HELPING YOUR CHILD DEVELOP HEALTHY HABITS

Just when kids have shed the blankies and binkies of early youth, parents often yearn for them to develop new habits that can make family life easier and more tranquil, such as doing chores and tackling homework without a fight. Here are four steps to the next level of behavior change.

1. Avoid external rewards. A recent meta-analysis of more than 40 studies on habit formation showed that external rewards or deterrents—sticker charts, paying for grades, punishment—undermine motivation and aren't helpful for forming good habits. "The reward isn't enough to sustain the habit long-term," says Jessica Lahey, author of *The Gift of Failure*. "For middle-school kids and older, you really need to be talking with them about why you're trying to develop a habit," and then you need to be a role model.

2. Model good habit formation. "You may not realize your kids are watching you or paying attention, but they are," warns psychologist and author Susan Newman, "and I think parents forget that they are the teacher and role model. It's their job to instill the repetition—putting the napkin on the lap, saying 'thank you,' helping a

neighbor." Lahey agrees: "The best way for us to instill good habits in our children is to model having good habits."

3. Involve your child in the solution. Parents often forget to ask their kids for input into behavior change, says Lahey. She remembers a pivotal moment when she realized that her 12-year-old son was repeatedly forgetting his backpack and she kept commenting on it: "You forget your backpack every day!" One day Lahey thought to say, "When I leave the house every day, I go through this mental checklist: 'Do I have my keys? Do I have my phone?' What could you do to solve the problem?" Now age 14, her son came up with his own solution, a morning and an evening checklist, that has helped him keep track of his belongings ever since. "They are going to be a lot more invested in a solution they come up with themselves than



one you come up with," says Lahey.

4. Give it time. A lot of time. Research into habits says it takes 30 days to form one. For kids, says KJ Dell'Antonia, the author of *How to Be a Happier Parent*, it's probably more like two to three months. And, she says, the parents she interviewed for her book who were most successful at instilling chores as habits had assigned them at a specific time of day and for long periods. "They gave their kids a chore for a year. In our house, we do them by season," says Dell'Antonia. "You have a vastly greater chance of them remembering to do them." You can also use a child's love of routine to your advantage. For instance, if you are trying

to teach your second grader to establish a good homework habit, set aside a specified period every day that is homework time. "If they don't have homework, they read for that time," says Dell'Antonia. "If they finish before the half hour is up, they read for the remainder."

Know, above all, that you are not likely to experience overnight success. "When we are looking for behavior change," says child and family therapist Emily Green, "we should be looking for the tiny little stepping stones that create this one behavior." But the good news is that you can save your energy for the ones that really matter and see them as opportunities to connect to your kids and strengthen your family.