

# MIND in the Making

## The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

### PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING

#### Morning Routine

Promoting the Life Skill of Critical Thinking in Preschoolers and School Age Children  
Six Strategies That Work in Moving from Managing Children's Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

**Question:** It's a constant struggle to get my daughter up and out of the house in the morning. She refuses to wash her face, brush her teeth, get dressed or let me comb her hair. I've tried getting her to bed earlier, but it doesn't make the mornings any better. How can I speed up my morning dawdler?

Life usually goes more smoothly when you and your child work together on problems. Creating a morning routine WITH your child is a great opportunity to form a team effort by using a problem-solving process and at the same time, promote your child's Critical Thinking skills.

**In the words of Frank Keil of Yale University, "Critical thinking is the ability to step back and look at what you're doing, to look at the dimensions of the task, and to evaluate."**

**Phil Zelazo of the University of Minnesota has described this as a process that uses Executive Functions of the brain, which come into play whenever we engage in behavior that is deliberately goal directed.**

**1. Identify the dilemma, problem or issue.** To clarify the problem from each of your perspectives, have a frank but non-judgmental discussion with your child:

- "What does our morning routine feel like now to each of us?"
- "How would each of us like our morning routine to feel like in the future?"

This conversation will be a starting point in identifying a mutual goal.

**2. Determine a mutual goal.** You can continue the conversation by stating each of your goals:

- "I'd like you to be dressed, with your teeth brushed and hair combed by 7:30 AM so we can enjoy each other and not have to rush."

Next, restate your child's goal:

- "You want mornings to be more peaceful with us not fussing at each other."

Then summarize what you both want that's the same:

- "We both want mornings to be calmer with less fighting."

**The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that when disciplining your child, you give her opportunities to make real choices.**

Having your child work with you on solving this problem provides an opportunity to give her some control and choice over how the morning goes.

**3. Come up with alternative solutions.** When you and your child come up with new solutions that you haven't already tried, you are encouraging her to think flexibly. Ask your child to think of ALL of the ideas she has to make the mornings better.

It is a good idea to write down all of these ideas without judgment. Include your own ideas too, such as a visual checklist of the required morning tasks.

**Phil Zelazo notes that considering alternative solutions requires inhibiting “the tendency to do what one has done before in that situation.” In order to consider alternative solutions, you must use the skill of self control rather than going on automatic pilot and taking the easy way out.**

**4. Consider how these alternative solutions might work.** Go through each of the ideas your child has suggested with an open mind, discussing:

- “What would work for you if we tried out this idea? What wouldn't work?”
- “What would work for me? What wouldn't work?”

These questions help your child take your perspective, another important life skill.

If your child hasn't come up with any acceptable ideas, you might suggest some:

- “I know a child who had better mornings when there was a to-do list. I know of another child who liked a timer.”

Alternatively, you can ask your child what someone she admires might do:

- “What do you think your cousin would do if she had this problem?”

**Phil Zelazo also says, “Critical thinking is closely related to reflection ... Reflection results in and makes critical thinking possible.”**

**5. Select a solution to try with consequences if it doesn't work.** After discussing and evaluating several options for a new morning plan, select one together to try out. This process involves reflection and Critical Thinking.

Talk with your child about the consequences if the solution doesn't work. Enlist her in deciding on a consequence that she really cares about, one that will motivate her to make a real effort to carry through the new approach you have mutually decided upon to make mornings calmer and more peaceful.

**6. Evaluate the outcome over time, and if the solution isn't working, problem solve again.** If you're not getting the results you want, be willing to change your plan or the way that your plan is being carried out. Involve your child in your evaluation of how it's going and what changes could be made by going through the problem-solving process again.

**These six strategies will promote the life skill of Critical Thinking and move from managing children's behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.**

**Critical Thinking** is the ongoing search for valid and reliable knowledge to guide beliefs, decisions and actions.

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**Mind in the Making (MITM)**, at The Bezos Family Foundation, is an unprecedented effort to share the science of children's learning with the general public, families and professionals who work with them. Based on *Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs* (HarperCollins, 2010) by Ellen Galinsky, Chief Science Officer at The Bezos Family Foundation, its mission is to promote Executive Function life skills in adults and through them in children in order to keep the fire for learning burning brightly in all of us.

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