- Habit

The importance of routine

From emotional regulation to memory, young brains thrive on patterns and predictability.

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DURING school holidays (which start this weekend in Malaysia), bedtimes often drift later, screens creep into the day, and the predictable rhythm of school life is replaced by a much looser schedule.



While that freedom can seem exciting for young children at first, days without any consistent routine can also have surprising effects on their developing brains.

We spoke to Dr Rowanne Dinning, clinical psychologist at Cygnet Health Care, who explained what can happen inside your child's brain when routine disappears, and shared some helpful tips on how to strike the right balance between fun and stability.

"The prefrontal cortex in the brain is responsible for executive functioning – which includes important functions such as planning, decision making and reasoning – and having a routine and predictability helps form neural pathways in that part of the brain because they're getting used all of the time, which means that we get better and better at decision making and planning," the psychologist explains.

"However, during school holidays when routine often goes out the window, these areas are not used as much so those pathways are not getting strengthened."

"When habits and routines fall off for a longer period of time that can cause stress for some young people, causing the stress hormones in the body, such as cortisol, to get higher and higher," says Dinning.

"When the cortisol levels increase in different parts of the brain, that can affect how these parts are working and developing."

It's important to establish a bit of routine around when kids are going to get up and when they are going to sleep. — Pexels

"When children have routines during school term, this can be quite rewarding and trigger dopamine increases in the brain. In addition, when they know what to expect on a day-to-day basis this

predictability can help them regulate their emotions," the psychologist explains.
"However, when that is taken away, any stresses that come up might feel more difficult.
Children are more likely to get bored and this might lead to impulsivity or increased risk behaviours.
"For some children, it can have knock-on effects and might lead to mental health difficulties such as anxiety."
"A good night's sleep is really important for the brain, especially in young children whose brains are still developing, because that's when the brain can process the day and have time to grow and repair," notes Dinning.
"In the holidays our sleep routine often changes and children might go to bed later or sleep in later and that can affect this brain development and repair process."
Dinning also highlights how sleep and routine can have a significant impact on what children remember, particularly in terms of short-term memory.
"At night time we process the memories of the day, even the stuff that's been going on subconsciously. However, if we're not getting enough sleep, we might feel more irritable the next day and struggle with attention and concentration, which can have knock-on effects on our shortterm memory," says Dinning.
A good routine helps set our circadian rhythm ... which dictates when you should sleep and eat.
Dr Rowanne Dinning
"When things are predictable, we're more likely to recall things. For example, if you ask a child what they did at a certain time, if they have a routine, they are more likely to recall what they did in a particular lesson at a particular time.
"However, when that routine goes out the window, it can be a bit harder for them to organise in their brain where certain memories were and what time of the day they occurred, or what importance they have."
"A good routine helps set our circadian rhythm (the body's internal 24-hour biological clock) which dictates when you should sleep and eat, but when routines change and our circadian rhythms are a bit out of whack that can cause stress and anxiety," the psychologist notes.
Here's Dinning's top tips for parents who are keen to reestablish some routine during school holidays:
"Where possible, help your child keep up with their usual interests, hobbies and sports," recommends Dinning. "Maybe ask them if they have a preference for a particular activity and then set a time for that hobby."
"Plan times where they can see lots of family and friends so they can keep that social connection going," recommends Dinning. "Socialising is really important for their social and emotional development, and also their communication needs as well."
"Try and establish a bit of routine around when they are going to get up and when they are going to sleep, particularly Monday to Friday," advises Dinning.
"Try to stay consistent with the times they get up and have breakfast and have lunch and dinner," advises Dinning. "Eating dinner late and too close to bedtime might affect their sleep, and have negative knock-on effects on their brain."

“Set a time for some sort of exercise or movement, so that they’re always moving their body at a particular time of day,” suggests Dinning.

“If your child is really struggling, don’t being afraid to seek some support from family members or local services if it’s getting a bit too much,” says Dinning.

“Your GP might be able to offer some support and there are also lots of helpful services for young people struggling with mental health including online resources such as the Mind website.” – PA Media/dpa