

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Parenting

Do mornings with the kids have to be hell?



Mother Laura Vickers contends with squabbling siblings, custom-ordered lunches and misplaced textbooks as part of

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On the worst mornings, Laura Vickers has brushed her kids' teeth at the bus stop. She's licked the smear of chocolate breakfast bars off their faces when she couldn't find a Kleenex in her pocket. Her 8-year-old twin boys, Jacob and Liam, now go to sleep in the shirts they plan to wear to school the next day – shaving 30 seconds off the morning rush, provided they don't use them as napkins at breakfast. Bed head rules: "I don't even think they know what a hairbrush looks like," the Scarborough mom sighs.

Her 10-year-old son, Aidan, usually eats his breakfast watching the sports news on television – it's either that or listen to the bickering because his 13-year-old sister, Hannah, looked at him the wrong way, or one of his younger brothers is breathing too loudly. Then there's the custom-ordered lunches, the misplaced school books. And yes, the yelling – some days, she just closes the door after they leave and cries because she feels so guilty about it.

"It's hell on earth here some mornings," says Ms. Vickers, who works part-time in the merchandising department of Procter & Gamble. "I have to make sure the windows are closed so the neighbours don't hear me. There are days when my throat is raw."

Ah, the harmonious soundtrack of the modern family's morning ritual: Did you brush your teeth? I really need you to brush your teeth. Brush your teeth! (Other favourites include – Get Your Boots On, Where's Your Homework?, and the always soothing classic, Why Didn't You Ask Me To Sign This Last Night?)

Forget fussy bedtimes. For many families, morning is the most stressful part of the day, when groggy kids (and parents) are all trying to get out the door at the same time. In an ideal world, Ms. Vickers admits, she'd have the energy to prepare lunches the night before, and pop out of bed to an earlier alarm. But then again, in that same perfect world, nobody would forget their snow pants.

So here's what some parenting experts say: Let them go to school sans snow pants (and lunchless, too, if it comes to that).

Crazy mornings were a frustrating reality for Christine Carter, mom to two young girls, executive director of the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley, and author of the new parenting book *Raising Happiness*.

"They used to be horrific," says Dr. Carter, of her mornings. "I was yelling at my kids at the same time every day."

For her, the solution meant restructuring the morning, laying out responsibilities, and allowing her kids to mess up sometimes – research suggests, she says, that it can actually be a useful (and, ultimately, happiness-building) life lesson for children to go to school with their homework missing. She also set guidelines that her kids can follow on their own, which involved setting three separate alarms in her iPhone that define stages of the morning, ending with the "if-you-don't-walk-out-the-door-right-this-second-you-will-miss-the-bus alarm."

Toronto parenting expert Alyson Schafer is even tougher: Once her two children, now teenagers, were able to get themselves dressed, she simply went outside to wait for them, reading the paper, or weeding the garden, until they were ready. Dawdling requires an audience, she says, and leads to a power-struggle. "It's a bit like getting a donkey to move, if you try to pull them you don't get very far."

And if families do finally make it to school, it's often not cheerfully. Ms. Schafer often hears moms talk about feeling lousy all day at work because they lost it with their kids.

Instead, she says, her hands-off approach required her kids to become the clock-watchers, and take responsibility to get their school supplies together. Don't say: I am leaving without you. (Since you probably won't.) Say: I'll drive you when you're ready. The important part, Ms. Schafer says, is to be consistent – they have to be in charge of their mittens every day – and accept that they will make mistakes. She estimates that her kids were late for school 72 times in Grade 2. "All they ever missed was putting the scarf on the weather bear."

(If you really have to get to work, she suggests hiring a babysitter to stay home with the kids so they learn they have to be ready on time – though, as one mom pointed out, this approach can be complicated, and costly.)

But now, with her kids at the ages of 15 and 16, Ms. Schafer says she sips her morning coffee and reads, while they get themselves ready. That's a lot better than the mom at one of her parenting workshops, who was complaining that her son wouldn't get of bed or come down to breakfast in the mornings – and he was a student at Seneca College.

"Everyone in the room said that this was their eye opener – if I am not going to do it this year, when am I?"

Back in Scarborough, Ms. Vickers is making small steps toward autonomy. "It's faster for you to just do it," she says. "But I know I am not doing them any favours. I have to give them a little more independence."

With her husband off to catch the GO Train first thing in the morning, she still makes her kids individual lunches, lets them eat different things for breakfast, and coaches them on their knapsack packing. But her daughter, Hannah, who doesn't like being late for school, is now helping to move the morning along. And everyone knows they are responsible for putting away their breakfast dishes. Even after the most chaotic morning, she says, "at the end of the day, they come home, they're happy and no worse for wear."

For now, if they miss the bus, "good old mom" is still prepared to drive them. But she believes they'll figure it out.

"As terrible as those mornings are," she says, "I wouldn't give up my time with them for anything."