

## Back to School

Whether their summer was jam-packed with activities or filled with complaints about being bored with nothing to do, kids often have a tough time making the back-to-school transition.

### **Battling the Butterflies**

As with any new or potentially unsettling situation — like starting school for the first time or entering a new grade or new school — allow kids time to adjust. Remind them that everyone feels a little nervous about the first day of school and that it will all become an everyday routine in no time.

Emphasize the positive things about going back to school, such as hanging out with old friends, meeting new classmates, buying cool school supplies, getting involved in sports and other activities, and showing off the new duds (or snazzy accessories if your child has to wear a uniform).

It's also important to talk to kids about what worries them and offer reassurance: Are they afraid they won't make new friends or get along with their teachers? Is the thought of schoolwork stressing them out? Are they worried about the bully from last year?

Consider adjusting your own schedule to make the transition smoother. If possible, it's especially beneficial for parents to be home at the end of the schoolday for the first week. But many working moms and dads just don't have that flexibility. Instead, try to arrange your evenings so you can give kids as much time as they need, especially during those first few days.

If your child is starting a new school, contact the school before the first day to arrange a visit. And ask if your child can be paired up with another student, or "buddy," and if you can be connected with other new parents. This will help both of you with the adjustment to new people and surroundings. Some schools give kids maps to use until things become more familiar.

To help ease back-to-school butterflies, try to transition kids into a consistent school-night routine a few weeks before school starts. Also make sure that they:

- get enough sleep (establish a reasonable bedtime so that they'll be well-rested and ready to learn in the morning)
- eat a healthy breakfast (they're more alert and do better in school if they eat a good breakfast every day)
- write down the need-to-know info to help them remember details such as their locker combination, what time classes and lunch start and end, their homeroom and classroom numbers,

teachers' and/or bus drivers' names, etc.

- use a wall calendar or personal planner to record when assignments are due, tests will be given, extracurricular practices and rehearsals will be held, etc.
- have them organize and set out what they need the night before (homework and books should be put in their backpacks by the door and clothes should be laid out in their bedrooms)

Although it's normal to be anxious in any new situation, a few kids develop real physical symptoms, such as headaches or stomachaches, associated with the start of school. If you're concerned that your child's worries go beyond the normal back-to-school jitters, speak with your child's doctor, teacher, or school counselor.

### **Back-to-School To-Do's**

Parents themselves can be a little nervous about the first day of school, especially if they're seeing their little one off for the first time or if their child will be attending a new school.

To help make going to school a little easier on everyone, here's a handy checklist:

#### **What to wear, bring, and eat:**

- Does the school have a dress code? Are there certain things they can't wear?
- Will kids need a change of clothes for PE or art class?
- Do your kids have a safe backpack that's lightweight, with two wide, padded shoulder straps, a waist belt, a padded back, and multiple compartments?
- Do kids know not to overload their backpacks and to stow them safely at home and school?
- Will your kids buy lunch at school or bring it from home? If they buy a school lunch, how much will it cost per day or per week? Do you have a weekly or monthly menu of what will be served?
- Have you stocked up on all of the necessary school supplies? (Letting kids pick out a new lunchbox and a set of pens, pencils, binders, etc., helps get them geared up for going back to school.)

#### **Medical issues:**

- Have your kids received all necessary immunizations?
- Have you filled out any forms that the school has sent home, such as emergency contact and health information forms?
- Do the school nurse and teachers know about any medical conditions your child may have, particularly food allergies, asthma, diabetes, and any other conditions that may need to be managed during the school day?

- Have you made arrangements with the school nurse to administer any medications your child might need?
- Do the teachers know about any conditions that may affect how your child learns? For example, kids with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) should be seated in the front of the room, and a child with vision problems should sit near the board.

### **Transportation and safety:**

- Do you know what time school starts and how your kids will get there?
- If they're riding the bus, do you know where the bus stop is and what time they'll be picked up and dropped off?
- Do you know where the school's designated drop-off and pick-up area is?
- Are there any regulations on bicycles or other vehicles, such as scooters?
- Have you gone over traffic safety information, stressing the importance of crossing at the crosswalk (never between parked cars or in front of the school bus), waiting for the bus to stop before approaching it, and understanding traffic signals and signs?
- If your child walks or bikes to school, have you mapped out a safe route? Does your child understand that it's never OK to accept rides, candy, or any other type of invitation from strangers?

### **What About After School?**

Figuring out where kids will go after school can be a challenge, especially if both parents work. Depending on a child's age and maturity, you may need to arrange for after-school transportation and care.

It's important for younger kids and preteens to have some sort of supervision from a responsible adult. If you can't be there as soon as school's out, ask a reliable, responsible relative, friend, or neighbor to help out. If they're to be picked up after school, make sure your kids know where to meet you or another caregiver.

Although it might seem like kids who are approaching adolescence are becoming mature enough to start watching themselves after school, even kids as old as 11 or 12 may not be ready to be left alone.

If your kids or teens are home alone in the afternoons, it's important to establish clear rules:

- Set a time when they're expected to arrive home from school.
- Have them check in with you or a neighbor as soon as they get home.

- Specify who, if anyone at all, is allowed in your home when you're not there.
- Make sure they know to **never** open the door for strangers.
- Make sure they know what to do in an emergency.

To ensure that kids are safe and entertained after school, look into after-school programs. Some are run by private businesses, others are organized by the schools themselves, places of worship, police athletic leagues, YMCAs, community and youth centers, and parks and recreation departments.

Getting involved in after-school activities:

- offers kids a productive alternative to watching TV or playing video games
- provides some adult supervision when parents can't be around after school
- helps develop kids' interests and talents
- introduces kids to new people and helps them develop their social skills
- gives kids a feeling of involvement
- keeps kids out of trouble

Be sure to look into the child-staff ratio at any after-school program (in other words, make sure that there are enough adults per child) and that the facilities are safe, indoors and out. And kids should know when and who will pick them up when school lets out and when the after-school program ends.

Also, make sure after-school commitments allow kids enough time to complete school assignments. Keep an eye on their schedules to make sure there's enough time for both schoolwork and home life.

## **Helping Homework**

Love it or hate it, homework is a very important part of school. To help kids get back into the scholastic swing of things:

- Make sure there's a quiet place that's free of distractions to do homework.
- Don't let kids watch TV when doing homework or studying. Set rules for when homework and studying need to be done, and when the TV can be turned on and should be turned off. The less TV, the better, especially on school nights.
- If your kids are involved in social media, be sure to limit the time spent on these activities during homework time.
- Keep text messaging to a minimum to avoid frequent interruptions.
- Never do their homework or projects yourself. Instead, make it clear that you're always available to help or answer any questions.
- Review homework assignments nightly, not necessarily to check up, but to make sure they

understand everything.

Encourage kids to:

- develop good work habits from the get-go, like taking notes, writing down assignments, and turning in homework on time
- take their time with schoolwork
- ask the teacher if they don't understand something

To ensure kids get the most out of school, maintain an open channel of communication with the teachers by e-mailing or talking with them throughout the school year to discuss your kids' academic strengths as well as weaknesses.

Most of all, whether it's the first day of school or the last, make sure your kids know you're there to listen to their feelings and concerns, and that you don't expect perfection — only that they try their best.

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