

Back-To-School Transitions: What Parents Can Do

Getting a new school year off to a good start can influence children's attitude, confidence, and performance both socially and academically. The transition from August to September can be difficult for children and parents. Even children who are eager to return to class must adjust to the greater levels of activity, structure, and, for some, pressures associated with school life. The degree of adjustment depends on the child, but parents can help their children (and the rest of the family) manage the increased pace of life by planning ahead, being realistic, and maintaining a positive attitude. Following are a few helpful suggestions to ease the transition and promote a successful school experience.

Before School Starts

Be sure your child is in good physical and mental health. Schedule doctor and dental checkups early. Discuss with your pediatrician any concerns you have over your child's emotional or psychological development. Your doctor can help determine if your concerns are normal, age appropriate issues or require further assessment. Your child will benefit if you can identify and begin addressing a potential issue before school starts. Schools appreciate the efforts of parent to remedy problems sooner than later.

Review all of the information sent by the schools as soon as it arrives. These packets include important information on your child's teacher, room number, school supply requirements, sign ups for after-school sports and activities, school calendar dates, bus transportation, health and emergency forms, and volunteer opportunities.

Mark your calendar with important dates, such as back to school night. This is especially important if you have children in more than one school and need to juggle obligations. Arrange for a babysitter now, if necessary.

Make copies of all health and emergency information for your reference later. Health forms are typically good for more than a year and can be used again for camps, extracurricular activities, and the following school year.

Buy school supplies early and fill the backpacks a week or two before school starts. Older children can help do this, but make sure they use a checklist that you can review. Some teachers require specific supplies, so save receipts for items that may need to be returned.

Plan to reestablish the bedtime and mealtime routines (including breakfast) at least one week before school starts. Prepare your children for this change by talking to them about the benefits of school routines in terms of not becoming overtired or overwhelmed by school work and activities. Include pre-bedtime reading and household chores, if these were suspended during the summer.

Encourage your children to play quiet games, do puzzles, flash cards, color or read as their early morning activities, instead of watching television. This will help ease them into the learning process and school regime. If possible, maintain this practice

throughout the school year. Television is distracting for many children and they will arrive at school better prepared to learn each morning if they have engaged in less passive activities.

Visit school with your child if they are young or new to the school. Meeting their teacher, locating their classroom, locker, lunchroom, etc., will help ease pre-school anxieties and also allow the child to ask questions about their new environment. Call ahead to make sure the teacher will be available to say "hello" to your child.

Minimize clothes shopping woes by buying only the essentials. Summer clothes are usually fine during the early fall, but be sure to have at least one pair of sturdy shoes. Check with your school to confirm dress code guidelines. Common concerns include extremely short skirts and shorts, low rise pants, bare midriffs, spaghetti strap or halter tops, exposed undergarments, and clothing that has antisocial messages.

Designate and clear a place to do homework. Older children should have the option to study in their room or a quiet area of the house. Younger children usually need an area set aside in the family room or kitchen to enable adult monitoring, supervision, and encouragement.

Select a spot to keep backpacks, lunch boxes etc. as well as a place for your child to put important notices and information sent home for you to see. Explain that emptying their backpack each evening is part of their responsibility, even for young children.

Freeze a few easy dinners so that meal preparation won't add to household tension during the first week of school.

The First Week

Clear your own schedule. To the extent possible, postpone business trips, volunteer meetings, extra projects, etc. You want to be free to help your child acclimate to the school routine and overcome the confusion or anxiety that many children experience at the start of a new school year.

Make lunches the night before school. Older children should help or make their own. Give them the option to buy lunch in school if they prefer and finances permit.

Have school-age children set their own alarm clock to get up in the morning. Praise them for prompt response to morning schedules and bus pickups.

Leave plenty of extra time to get up, eat breakfast, and get to school. For very young children taking the bus, pin to their shirt or backpack an index card with pertinent information, including their teacher's name and bus number, as well as your daytime contact information.

Review with your child what to do if they get home after school and you are not there. Be very specific, particularly with young children. Put a note card in their backpack with the name(s) and number(s) of a neighbor who is home during the day as well as a number

where you can be reached. If you have not already done so, have your child meet their neighbor contacts to reaffirm their backup support personally.

Review your child's schoolbooks with them and talk about what they will be learning during the year. Share your enthusiasm for subject matters and their ability to master the content. Reinforce the natural progression of the learning process that occurs over the school year. Learning skills take time and repetition. Encourage your child to be patient, attentive, and positive.

Send a brief note to your child's teacher letting them know that you are interested in getting regular feedback on how and what your child is doing in school. Be sure to attend back to school night and introduce yourself to the teacher. Find out how they like to communicate with parents, e.g. through notes, e-mail, or phone calls. Convey a sincere desire to be a partner with your child's teacher to enhance their learning experience.

Familiarize yourself with the other professionals in the building or district who can be a resource for your child. Learn their roles and how best to access their help if you need them. This can include the principal and front office personnel; school psychologist, counselor, and social worker; the reading specialist, speech therapist, and school nurse; and the after school activities coordinator.

Overcoming Anxiety

If your child is anxious about school, send personal "love" notes in their lunch box or book bag. Reinforce their ability to cope. Children absorb their parent's anxiety, so model optimism and confidence for your child. Let him know that it is natural to be a little nervous anytime you start something new but that they will be just fine once they become familiar with their classmates, teacher, and school routine.

Don't over-react if the first few days are a little rough. Young children in particular may experience separation anxiety or shyness initially but teachers are trained to help them adjust. If you drop them off, don't linger. Reassure them that you love them, will think of them during the day, and will be back. Remain calm and positive.

Acknowledge anxiety over a bad experience the previous year. Children who had a difficult time academically or socially, or were teased or bullied may be more fearful or reluctant to return to school. If you have not yet done so, share your child's concern with the school and confirm that the problem has been addressed. Reassure your child that the problem will not occur again in the new school year, and that you and the school are working together to prevent further issues. Reinforce your child's ability to cope. Give them a few strategies to manage a difficult situation on their own, but encourage them to tell you or their teacher if the problem persists. Maintain open lines of communications with the school.

Arrange play dates or get-togethers with some of your child's classmates before school starts and during the first weeks of schools to help your child reestablish positive social relationships with their peers.

If possible, plan to volunteer in the classroom at least periodically throughout the year. Doing so helps your child understand that their school and family life are linked and that you care about their learning experience. Being in the classroom is also a good way to develop a relationship with your child's teacher and classmates, and to get firsthand exposure to their classroom environment and routine. Most teachers welcome even occasional parent help, if you cannot volunteer regularly.

Extra Curricular Activities

Go for quality, not quantity. Your child will benefit most from one or two activities that are fun, reinforce their social development, and teach new skills. Too much scheduled time can be stressful, especially for young children, and may make it harder to concentrate on schoolwork.

Consider your family schedule and personal energy level. Multiple activities per child may be too much to manage, particularly if they have overlapping times, disparate locations, require your attendance, and/or disrupt the dinner hour.

Select activities where you have someone with whom you can carpool. Even if you are available to drive most days, you will need backup sometimes. Choosing activities that occur on-site after school will also minimize driving.

Find out from the school or teacher which days will be heavy homework or test study days and schedule extracurricular activities accordingly.

If your child doesn't want to participate in regular, organized extracurricular activities, you may want to consider other options to help build interests and social skills. For example, check out the local library for monthly reading programs, find out if your local recreation or community center offers drop-in activities, or talk to other parents and schedule regular play dates with their children.

These recommendations can contribute to a positive and productive school experience for most children. Some children may exhibit more extreme opposition to or fear of school or may be coping with more specific learning or psychological difficulties. If your child demonstrates problems that seem extreme in nature or go on for an extended period, you may want to contact the school to set up an appointment to meet with your child's teacher and school psychologist. They may be able to offer direct or indirect support that will help identify and reduce the presenting problem. They may also suggest other resources within the school and the community to help you address the situation.

While children can display a wide variety of behaviors, it is generally wise not to over interpret them. More often than not, time and a few intervention strategies will remedy the problem. Most children are wonderfully resilient and with your support and encouragement will thrive throughout their school experience.