Back-to-School Transitions: Tips for Parents

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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 both 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. Here are a few suggestions to help ease the transition and promote a successful school experience.

Before School Starts

Good physical and mental health. Be sure your child is in good physical and mental health. Schedule doctor and dental checkups early. Discuss any concerns you have over your child's emotional or psychological development with your pediatrician. 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 parents to remedy problems as soon as they are recognized.

Review all of the information. Review the material sent by the school as soon as it arrives. These packets include important information about 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. Make a note of important dates, especially back-to-school nights. 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. Make copies of all your child's health and emergency information for reference. 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. Try to get the supplies as early as possible 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 you may need to return later.

Re-establish the bedtime and mealtime routines. Plan to re-establish the bedtime and mealtime routines (especially breakfast) at least 1 week before school starts. Prepare your child for this change by talking with your child about the benefits of school routines in terms of not becoming over tired or overwhelmed by school work and activities. Include pre-bedtime reading and household chores if these were suspended during the summer.

Turn off the TV. Encourage your child to play quiet games, do puzzles, flash cards, color, or read as early morning activities instead of watching television. This will help ease your child into the learning process and school routine. If possible, maintain this practice throughout the school year. Television is distracting for many children, and your child will arrive at school better prepared to learn each morning if he or she has engaged in less passive activities.

Visit school with your child. If your child is young or in a new school, visit the school with your child. Meeting the teacher, locating their classroom, locker, lunchroom, etc., will help ease pre-school anxieties and also allow your child to ask questions about the new environment. Call ahead to make sure the teachers will be available to introduce themselves to your child.

Minimize clothes shopping woes. Buy 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 have antisocial messages.

Designate and clear a place to do homework. Older children should have the option of studying 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 facilitate adult monitoring, supervision, and encouragement.

Select a spot to keep backpacks and lunch boxes. Designate a spot for your children to place their school belongings as well as a place 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. It will be much easier on you if you have dinner prepared so that meal preparation will not add to household tensions during the first week of school.

The First Week

Clear your own schedule. To the extent possible, postpone business trips, volunteer meetings, and extra projects. 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.

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

Leave plenty of extra time. Make sure your child has plenty of 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.

After school. Review with your child what to do if he or she gets 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 neighbor contacts to reaffirm the backup support personally.

Review your child's schoolbooks. Talk about what your child will be learning during the year. Share your enthusiasm for the subjects and your confidence in your child's 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. Let the teachers 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 teachers. 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 children's teachers to enhance their learning experience.

Familiarize yourself with the other school professionals. Make an effort to find out who it is in the school or district who can be a resource for you and 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

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

Do not overreact. If the first few days are a little rough, try not to over react. Young children in particular may experience separation anxiety or shyness initially but teachers are trained to help them adjust. If you drop them off, try not to 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 your child a few strategies to manage a difficult situation on his or her own. But encourage your child to tell you or the teacher if the problem persists. Maintain open lines of communication with the school.

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

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

Extracurricular Activities

Go for quality, not quantity. Your child will benefit most from one or two activities that are fun, reinforce 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. When evaluating extracurricular activities, consider your family schedule and personal energy level. Multiple activities per child may be too much to manage, particularly if the activities have overlapping times, disparate locations, require your attendance, 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 does not 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.

When Problems Arise

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 teachers 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 variety of behaviors, it is generally wise not to over-interpret those behaviors. 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.

Resources

Clark, L. (1996). *SOS: Help for parents* (2nd ed.). Berkley, CA: Parents' Press. ISBN: 0935111204.

Dawson, M. P. (2004). Homework: A guide for parents. In A. Canter, L. Paige, M. Roth, I. Romero, & S. Carroll (Eds.), *Helping children at home and school II: Handouts for families and educators*. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

Rimm, S. (1996). *Dr. Sylvia Rimm's smart parenting: How to raise a happy, achieving child*. New York: Crown. ASIN: 0517700638.

Websites

National Association of School Psychologists— www.nasponline.org

Parent Information Center— www.parentinformationcenter.org

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