



# 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.

## BEFORE SCHOOL STARTS

The following suggestions can help ease the transition and promote a successful school experience:

**Be sure your children are in good physical and mental health.** Schedule doctor and dental checkups early. Discuss with your pediatrician any concerns you have over your children's emotional or psychological development. Your doctor can help determine if your concerns are normal, age-appropriate issues or require further assessment. Your children will benefit if you can identify and begin addressing potential problems before school starts.

**Review the material sent by the school as soon as it arrives.** These packets include important information about your children's teachers, assigned classrooms, 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 significant 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 baby-sitter well in advance of the visit with your child's teachers, as other parents will be seeking baby-sitting services for the same night.

**Make multiple 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.** Organize supplies and 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.

**Reestablish bedtime and mealtime routines (especially breakfast) at least 1 week before school starts.** Prepare your children for this change by talking about the benefits of school routines in terms of not becoming overtired or overwhelmed by schoolwork and activities. Help them to understand the reasons for these schedule adjustments so they do not view the changes as a punishment. Include prebedtime reading and household chores if these were suspended during the summer.

**Turn off the TV.** Encourage your children to play quiet games, do puzzles, review flash cards, color, or read as early morning activities instead of watching television. This will help ease them into the learning process and school routine. 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 children.** If your children are young or in new schools, schedule a school visit before classes begin. Meeting teachers and locating classrooms, locker, lunchroom, and so on will help ease anxieties and also allow your children to ask questions about the new environment. Call ahead to make sure the teachers will be available to introduce themselves.

**Minimize clothes shopping woes.** Buy only the essentials. Summer clothes are usually fine during the early fall, but be sure each child has at least one pair of sturdy shoes. Check with your school to confirm dress code guidelines.

**Designate a study/work area for 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 place for your children to put their school belongings and a place to put important notices and information sent home for you to see. Explain that emptying their backpack each evening is 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

Some helpful suggestions for the first week of school include the following:

**Clear your own schedule.** To the extent possible, postpone business trips, volunteer meetings, and extra projects. You want to be free to help your children acclimate to the school routine and overcome the confusion or anxiety that many children experience at the start of a new school year. Providing calming, reassuring messages to your children may help them keep the stress manageable.

**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. Praise them for paying attention to morning schedules and being ready for bus pickups.

**Leave plenty of extra time.** Make sure your children have 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.

**Prepare for after school.** Review with your children 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 backpacks 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 children meet neighbor contacts to reaffirm the backup support in person.

**Review your children's schoolbooks.** Talk about what your children will be learning during the year. Share your enthusiasm for the subjects and your confidence in your children's ability to master the content. Learning skills take time and repetition. Encourage your children to be patient, attentive, and positive.

**Send a brief note to your children's teachers.** Let the teachers know that you are interested in getting regular feedback on how and what your children are 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.** 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; reading specialist, speech therapist, and school nurse; and after-school activities coordinator.

## OVERCOMING ANXIETY

Thoughtful preparation is essential but will not necessarily eliminate all feelings of anxiety at the beginning of the school year. Here are other ways that parents can help ease their children's worries and discomfort:

**Let your children know you care.** If your children are anxious about school, send personal notes in their lunch boxes or bookbags. Children absorb their parent's anxiety, so model optimism and confidence. Let them

know it is natural to be a little nervous anytime you start something new but they will be just fine once they become familiar with classmates, teachers, and school routines.

**Do not overreact.** If the first few days are a little rough, try not to overreact. Young children in particular may experience separation anxiety or shyness initially, but teachers are trained to help them adjust. If you drop your children 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 from 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. Be sure to let your children know that you are always available to listen to them and be of assistance, if needed.

**Reinforce your children's ability to cope.** Give your children a few strategies to manage a difficult situation on their own, but encourage them to tell you or the teacher if the problem persists. Praise your children's attempts at problem-solving difficult situations. Maintain open lines of communication with the school.

**Arrange play dates.** Try to arrange get-togethers with some of your children's classmates before school starts and during the first weeks of school to help them reestablish positive social relationships with peers.

**Plan to volunteer in the classroom.** Doing so helps your children 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.

## 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 they may be coping with more specific learning or psychological difficulties. If your child demonstrates one or more problems that seem more intense 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 problem(s). They may also suggest other resources available within the school and the community.

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

## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

### Print

- Clark, L. (2005). *SOS: Help for parents* (3rd ed.). Berkley, CA: Parents' Press.
- Garrison, D. R. (2005). *Ending the homework wars*. Cameron Park, CA: Leading Edge Press.
- Shumm, J. S. (2005). *How to help your child with homework: The complete guide to encouraging good study habits and ending the homework wars*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing.

### Online

- National Association of School Psychologists: <http://www.nasponline.org>
- National Education Association, *Help your student get the most out of homework*: <http://www.nea.org/parents/homework.html>
- Parent Information Center: <http://www.parentinformationcenter.org>
- U.S Department of Education, *Helping your child with homework*: <http://www.ed.gov/parents/academic/help/homework/index.html>

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