

Start the School Year Right



A little preparation can make the transition easier for the whole family.

by Emily Graham

Forget last year's late-night homework sessions and missed bus rides—the start of a new school year is a great time to reevaluate family routines and set guidelines to help your child succeed.

This year, make going back to school about more than buying school supplies. Think ahead to help your family ride out the surprises the year is sure to bring, and follow these expert tips to start off right.

Lay the Groundwork

Going back to school doesn't have to mean homework fights and bedtime protests. While some experts advise creating homework schedules or activity charts, parenting coach Erin Brown Conroy says the first step parents should take to minimize disputes is to communicate their expectations clearly. Talk about homework rules and daily routines before school starts. Then, enforce family rules consistently.

Even on the toughest of days, it's important to keep a positive attitude. Instead of focusing on what children "have to do" for homework, emphasize what they "get to learn," Brown Conroy says. If your child becomes overwhelmed by homework, help break down the work into easily accomplished tasks.

Brown Conroy, the author of *20 Secrets to Success With Your Child*, also advises parents to think ahead to what difficult situations their children may encounter, such as making new friends, and to talk about ways to deal with these situations before they occur.

Ease Anxieties

Starting a new grade or moving to a new school can be frightening. Parents can ease these anxieties by helping students feel prepared for school. If your child walks or rides a bicycle to school, walk or ride the route with him. If your child rides the bus, show her where the bus stop is, tell her about the schedule, and make sure she knows how to find the bus after school. Remind your child where he will go after school, whether it's home, to an extracurricular activity, or to a babysitter.

This is also a good time to talk about strategies for dealing with bullies. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends telling children to look the bully in the eye, stay calm, and stand tall. Teach children to respond to bullying by saying, “I don’t like what you are doing,” “Please do not talk to me like that,” or “Why would you say that?” Tell your child to walk away from a bully, and teach her when and how to ask for help.

Meet School Staff

It’s best to make an appointment for you and your child to meet the principal, your child’s teachers, and even the school counselor before school starts, says John Wherry, president of the Parent Institute, a private company that encourages parent involvement at school. Alternatively, find out when the school will hold an organized teacher night and make plans to be there.

“Let your child see what the place is like instead of just riding a bike around the school all summer and not knowing what goes on behind those doors,” advises Wherry, a former teacher.

If your child has special needs, inform the teacher before classes start. Also let the teacher know of changes that may affect your child’s behavior, such as a divorce, an illness or death of a family member, or a recent or pending move. In addition, help the teacher connect with your child by mentioning his interests or hobbies, Wherry says.

Learn About the Curriculum

The No Child Left Behind Act has made standardized tests more high-stakes than ever. Help your child do her best by understanding what she is expected to learn in her grade level. Because each state has different standards, the National Education Association recommends contacting the state department of education, the school district, or your child’s school for a copy of the standards.

The NEA suggests finding out the goals your child’s teacher has for the year and how students will be tested. In addition, look for ways to help your child develop academic skills at home. Younger children’s literacy skills, for example, can benefit from playing reading and rhyming games with parents. More advanced readers should be encouraged to talk about what they’ve read. For additional ideas, ask your child’s teacher to recommend educational books, websites, games, or crafts.

Get Involved

Find a way to be more involved in your child’s education this year. It might be volunteering to help in the classroom, or it could be as simple as talking with your child each day about what he’s learned. Set the stage for sharing by telling your child highlights of your day, Wherry advises. “Just by asking and paying attention you send a message that you think school is very important.”

Wherry recommends asking children to talk about the best part of the day, whether they learned anything that surprised them, and whether they asked good questions in class.

Plan Healthy Meals

Keep nutritious food on hand for breakfast or make sure your child eats breakfast at school. Students who eat breakfast focus better in class, perform better on tests, behave better, and are more likely to maintain a healthy weight.

Find out how to obtain a copy of the school menu and pack lunch on days the school serves meals your child doesn't like. If your child packs her own lunch, establish guidelines about what she is allowed to take. Consider limiting sugary soft drinks or drink boxes and junk food with low nutritional value, such as potato chips. In addition to fruits and vegetables, nuts and low-fat cheese make healthy snacks.

Build a Parent Network

You never know when you might need to call on other parents for help or advice. Seek them out at school events and parent group meetings. If the school publishes a family directory, write notes in the margins with information about parents you've met. Compile a list of names, phone numbers, and email addresses to coordinate carpooling and emergency baby-sitting. Keep a copy at work so you know whom to call when your schedule changes unexpectedly.