

Help Your Child Start School with Confidence

Summer's gone. And yes, it is THAT time of year again. Back to school brings a flurry of emotions for parents and children alike. It's true every year is different. And this year you can stress less. This is the year you can be confident of a successful school start by using a few easy strategies.

One week before school starts

The number one key to a successful school start is preparation. This requires parents to think ahead. One way to prepare is to establish bedtime and morning time routines at least one week before school starts. These routines will help both you and your child adjust mentally and physically from a summer schedule to a school schedule.

Another important preparation is purchasing school supplies well in advance of store shortages. It is important when purchasing the supplies to allow the child to choose one or two items he or she likes such as a special pencil or binder. The "special" supplies help a child know that school is something special and promotes confidence as your child faces a new school challenge. What is usually a small investment for parents can make going back to school a more positive experience for a child.

Third, visit the school with your child the week before school starts. Explore the halls. Show them where the bus drops them off and picks them up, where the cafeteria is and help them locate the office. This visit can dramatically reduce fears of the unknown, especially if your child is new to the school. It is important to take extra time visiting the school with kindergartners and first graders, but the visit is appropriate for any age. While you are at the school introduce them to their teacher. This can help establish a positive relationship between student and teacher.

Finally, talk with your student about specific concerns he or she has about going back to school. This open conversation is most important if a student is changing schools. During this time, help prepare your child for challenges at school, whether peer pressure or academic. Parents should let their children know that it is okay to be nervous or scared in a new environment and should keep a steady flow of communication. Normalize their tension by letting them know that adults also feel nervous in a new setting. By helping your student think about an appropriate reaction to difficult situations, he or she is more likely to make the right decision when faced with tough choices. This is also a good time to talk with your child about the characteristics they are looking for in friends and to encourage them to choose friends wisely.

The night before school starts.

The first day of school is a thrill to some parents and a time of panic to others. If you are stressed about your child going back to school, it is important that you express it to another adults rather than transferring it to the child unnecessarily. Another tip for the first day is organization. The night before school begins is very important to help the child feel prepared. That night the child's and clothes and shoes should be picked out to reduce the inevitable stress of the first morning. Let your child pick out a special outfit (within reason). The "dress for success" principle applies. If your child likes his clothing, he or she will feel sharper and more confident throughout the day. The night before school is also a good time to help your child pack their school bag, a practice that can reduce morning stress year round. The school bag should include school supplies and a special notebook for the child to write down homework assignments. This homework diary is a great habit to help your child develop. The notebook can also be an important tool to check academic progress daily.

I also recommend sending a family picture or a household item for your child. Many young students may feel abandoned or separation anxiety being away from their secure caretaker. A simple item from home can help

a child feel more secure. Notes from parents in a book bag or lunch can also help alleviate this feeling. Often what seems small to adults is large in the eyes of a child. For middle school or high school students, I also recommend putting the class schedule in a clear plastic folder to insure easy access.

After the First Day and Beyond

After the first day it is important to ask your child open ended questions to establish a good communications pattern for the year. Rather than asking “Did you like your teacher?” say “Can you tell me about your teacher?” The after school routine of homework should begin the first day. It is also important for parents to remember that school is a tough job for kids. As adults, we need to give them credit for the hard day they have put in and be patient if they are tired or cranky the first few days of school.

With simple preparation and effort, going back to school can be a time to deepen your parent-child relationship. By starting a healthy back to school routine, you can replace anxiety with excitement both for you and for your child.

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