

Start Smart!

25 ways to make this the best school year yet

BY KIM SEIDEL Published: August, 2009



Back-to-school means a new beginning. A fresh start. A clean slate. The new school year is filled with the promise of new experiences, new friends and a chance to learn new things. But how do you switch gears from the long and lazy days of summer fun and start to prepare your child for the more structured school year that is about to begin?

While this transition time isn't always easy for families, there are steps that parents can take this summer and in early autumn to help everyone get into the groove for a successful academic year.

1. Attend all "Welcome Back" events

Many schools host a day when children meet their teachers and visit their classrooms. Back-to-school events, held a few weeks before the start of the school year, can help parents to understand what will happen during the year, such as the curriculum, important dates and events, weekly routines and other information. Being informed will help you to do everything you can to support your child throughout the year.

2. Review your child's health status

Make sure your child has had her annual physical exam and is up to date on dental and vision checkups. Ideally, these are completed before the student enters the school building. Give your child the advantage of having her dental work done or getting new glasses before classes begin. This will help eliminate having to miss classes to make doctor appointments.

Ease into healthier eating habits. If your summer menus have consisted of too much fast food and processed snacks, it's time to transition your family back into eating more wholesome foods. Review the food groups, analyze the family's eating strengths and growth areas, and gradually modify the diet, starting with your next trip to the grocery store.

3. Watch the clock

It's easy to allow the children to stay up later and sleep in during the summer. Now's the time to start slowly steering the family toward getting to bed and getting up early. Once school starts, it will be easier on all involved.

4. Emphasize the importance of school

Start to prepare for a more serious and studious mode by asking your child about his future. Experts suggest taking your child out to a restaurant, buying him a treat and asking about his dreams. Then link his dreams to getting a good education.

Talk about family members who trained for a profession and assure your child that he can do the same thing, pointing out the importance of studying and hard work.

5. Get the brain working

Hopefully, you've been incorporating games, puzzles and books into your summer activities, but now's the time to begin to stimulate your child's mind toward academics. Ask math questions that relate to an activity you are engaging in. Take your child shopping for school supplies (many schools provide lists by grade level to help parents buy the appropriate supplies), and make it a fun outing.



6. Walk the campus

Even if your child is returning to the school they attended last year, it's a good idea to walk the campus together before the first day of school.

Familiarize yourself and your child with the location of her classroom, the lunch area, the restrooms and the pick-up spot after school.

7. Be there from day No. 1

Once the school year has begun, continue to offer support and encouragement for your young student to help him or her achieve academic excellence.

8. Volunteer in the classroom

Build rapport with the school. Offer to volunteer during the school days ahead when your schedule permits. Ask your child's teacher what he or she needs to make the year more successful. If you have a special skill or talent, offer to teach a lesson in the classroom.

9. Encourage independence

Helping your child learn to be responsible and work independently is important for success at both home and school. Make your child feel like a needed part of the family by giving him chores to do that help the family. Use a calendar and develop a routine, so that chores becomes a natural part of daily life.

10. Establish a routine

Along with chores, homework needs to become part of the daily routines. Make sure to designate a special place with all of the needed materials handy, so that your child can jump right into homework without having to search for supplies.

Also have her put her homework in her backpack once it's finished; she can place it by the door to take in the morning.



11. Stay organized

Have a designated place to keep important school papers for each child. One idea is to have your child decorate a very large shoebox and use that as the place where your child puts items that need to be signed and returned to school. If you and your child use that box consistently, you'll never be searching for lost permission slips, signed test papers and other forms.

12. Keep tabs on time

Stress the importance of being on time for the entire family. Make your child aware of time by using digital or egg timers when doing chores and getting ready in the morning. You can even make a game out of it. And don't forget to be a good role model by stopping what you're doing to get to appointments, play dates, church and school on time.

13. Value reading together

Taking the time to read as a family outside of the classroom sets the stage for continued school success. Experts suggest creating a 15-minute block of time when everybody reads and listens, or have a silent-reading night.

14. Prepare a few freeze-and-serve dinners

Make and freeze a couple of family dinners that you can pull out to enjoy during that very busy first week of school. Between all of the excitement of the new routine and last-minute shopping for school supplies the teacher says your child needs, your evenings will be busy! Having a healthy meal already prepared will help ease the stress.

15. Get everything ready the night before

Be prepared. Each evening, have your child set out the clothes he'll wear to school the next day, as well as other items. You'll save time and frustration by gathering school lunches, backpacks and the forms your child needs signed and



returned the next day if you prepare them all the night before.

16. Expect a honeymoon period

Susan Fletcher, author of "Parenting in the Smart Zone," says that there is a so-called honeymoon period at the beginning of school.

"For most children, there is some excitement going back to school, seeing their friends and having something to do," Fletcher says. "Believe it or not, some children report being bored at the end of the summer."

Then, about two weeks into school, many parents report that the "fun of it" wears off for their kids.

"Teachers begin to give assignments, the excitement of seeing their friends wears off, and school becomes more about serious stuff," Fletcher says. "The honeymoon is over. For most families, it may even feel like there was no summer break at all."

17. Plan a kid's get-together

Plan in advance to invite one or two of your child's friends over to play, spend the night or watch a movie about the third or fourth week of school.

"This gives your child something to look forward to and positive anticipation about spending time with a friend she hasn't seen all summer, especially if she had some disappointment about not being in the same class this year," Fletcher says.

18. Set clear expectations

Be clear about your expectations about when homework is to be done. Establish a set time, before or after play

time, and stick to it.

“Children at any age benefit from predictability,” Fletcher says. “We train people how to treat us. If you are relaxed about a routine at the beginning of the school year, and then begin to tighten up when assignments are due, it could send a mixed message.”

19. Promote discipline

Even if your child doesn't have a lot of homework, encourage him or her to read or study in workbooks during the time designated for homework, even if it is only for a half an hour.

“This mentally prepares children to devote time during the day for academics outside of school hours. It is like a mental place card and a good habit,” Fletcher says.

20. Celebrate with *your* friends

Parents need to take care of themselves, too, during this time of family transition. Plan activities that are stress relievers during the honeymoon period and use them when the challenges are about to begin.

“I've seen parents throw a party the first month of school. Everyone brings something to share for dinner, and you celebrate the beginning of school,” Fletcher says. “This will help you reconnect with your friends, too. We celebrate the end of school and the end of summer more often. Why not initiate the beginning of school as a time to celebrate?”

Parents can share practical information together about carpooling, curfews, clothes and make-up to help reinforce decisions with your children.



21. Prepare savvy snacks

Remember that a serving of fresh fruit or a plate of veggies makes a great afternoon snack – one that will fuel your children for an afternoon of homework and studying. Try to have something within easy reach for the kids, so they don't grab the chips and soda as soon as they arrive home from school.

22. Ask for help this school year

The approaching school year is a great time to look for ways you can ask for more help in your family life.

“We all like to think of turning a page in our lives, having a clean sheet, and that's exactly what a new school year represents,” says Peggy Collins, author of “Help is NOT a Four-Letter Word: Why Doing It All Is Doing You In” (McGraw Hill). “We have a brand-new opportunity to examine our behaviors about asking for help and seeing where changes could improve our own lives and the lives of our children. No place can be more valuable than in our schools.”

23. Get to know the teacher

Take the time to create relationships with teachers and other parents this school year. Teachers have perspective and can offer parents a candid view of their child's strengths and weaknesses. Talk with them regularly about ways you can help your child at home.

24. Talk to your children about their fears

For some children, back-to-school means the return of their fears. Nothing is worse than eating lunch alone or having to face the school bully again. Talk you're your child about his or her concerns, and enlist the teacher's help if necessary.

25. Get out the refrigerator magnets

Make sure to showcase your child's good grades and artwork in a special place – many families use their refrigerator door – so that the entire family can offer their kudos. Success breeds success.

Kim Seidel is a mother of two daughters.