

How to Handle Back to School

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One Mom's Story: "As a veteran of many years of 'back to schooling' I can still remember my ambivalent feelings. The first was: "Oh boy, now I get a few hours to myself every day – Yeah!" Followed quickly by: "Homework/Schedules/En-forced bedtimes/What to wear/Making lunches/Early morning grumpy children – Boo!" Sometimes I dreaded the 'back to school routine' more than my kids."

It doesn't have to be that way if you will spend a little time getting prepared and organized. Following are some tips for getting past the bumps in the road and settling down into a better routine.

Make the Experience More FUN for Everyone!

We all like to be rewarded for our efforts, right? That's what a paycheck is all about. Kids are no different and may be even more motivated by rewards. From a developmental standpoint children are very concrete thinkers. That means they either 'love' something or 'hate' it. They think something is 'ugly' or 'beautiful'. There is very little in-between for them because that calls for more abstract cognitive processing. So, if a child is given some sort of reward for accomplishing tasks, such as preparing clothes for the next day at school, or finishing homework on time, he or she will begin to connect something that may not be particularly desirable (homework/chores) with something good (reward).

The result is that he or she, over time, will become less resistant to the boring, tedious tasks. Praise and encouragement are always important components and should not be replaced by rewards, but because of their concrete thinking processes, children will respond better if praise and encouragement are paired with an actual reward. Think of ways to reward you children. A reward doesn't have to be a thing; it can just as easily be a privilege.

Here are a few things to keep in mind: Reward smaller segments of their accomplishments. Kids can't usually wrap their minds around a series of efforts. Doing homework every day for 5 days in order to get a reward is too far away for their minds to project. Break it down into daily actions and reward those. Some parents have a 'grab bag' of inexpensive, brightly wrapped items on hand for this purpose.

Keep in mind to deliver the reward as immediately as you can. It's hard for them to get motivated for a reward that will be delayed to next weekend or next month. So, for instance, if you promise a trip to the movies on Saturday if your child cleans his or her room, print or write out a 'ticket' to the movies on a piece of paper to hand to them. Make it very real and in the moment. It will have more impact.

Take care to create tasks and rewards for each child – don't pit them against each other to gain a reward. That will increase the potential for sibling rivalry to occur and no one needs that! Finally, one size does not fit all so make the reward age appropriate. What will motivate a 7 year old probably won't do it for a 12 year old.

Watch Your Own Stuff

It's been said that children learn everything they know about life, including family & relationships, before they learn to talk. While that may be a little extreme, We'd probably all agree that kids are amazingly observant. Be careful how your own attitude is expressed about going back

to school and the ensuing routines. You may not be excited about the transition, preferring the relaxed pace of summer days, so you will need to monitor how you express these feelings.

Children will pick up not only our attitudes but our language as well. If you are complaining and whining then, rest assured, they will too. Make the first day of school a day to look forward to by planning a special breakfast either at home or at a restaurant. Make a big deal out of preparing lunch – perhaps let your child pick out what he or she wants or create a special treat and assist in preparing it. Even small children can be included in this activity.

Make a Plan

Contrary to some popular opinion, most adults are smarter than their kids. If you will spend some time thinking ahead you will be able to make this transition from summer to school much easier for everyone involved. While your plan will need to fit your own particular needs, it's very important to talk about the beginning of school with your child. Get input on how he or she would like it to go.

Try to discern if there is any fear or concerns your child may have. A new school year can be very intimidating and create a feeling of vulnerability for a child. Brainstorm with him or her for a plan for wake up time, what to wear, what to take for lunch or snack.

Give choices, but limit them to minimize a power struggle. Children (and all people, actually) will involve themselves more if their ideas are incorporated into the planning. If your child is included in deciding the details of how to be well-prepared for this day, he or she will feel better about the occasion and be more cooperative. It will go smoother for everyone.

Be Consistent

The rule of thumb for any retail endeavor is “location, location, location”. Similarly, the rule of thumb for any parental endeavor is “consistency, consistency, consistency.” If you don't follow through you are cooked! It's as simple as that. Consistency can take a tremendous amount of effort, but the payoff will be well worth the energy that it will require of you. In the long run your children will benefit from knowing there is a plan and knowing that there are consequences for stepping outside the plan. Children thrive on routine because it creates a feeling of safety and comfort for them, no matter how much they complain about it. Starting school, regardless of their familiarity with the school, classmates, and teachers, can be a bit scary for them. How reassuring it will be for your child to know that there is a homework time set aside, that dinner will be served at the same time every night, and bedtime preparation will be consistent. You child will prosper and will be better equipped to handle the anxiety of their life challenges when home feels safe and secure. (A word of caution here: being consistent doesn't mean being rigid.)

As parents, we have the opportunity to speak encouragement and success into our children's lives. By thinking ahead and planning your approach you will be able to create a win-win situation for your child and your family.