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Back on Track – Getting Kids Ready for the New School Year

Summer's been great--swimming in the neighborhood pool, playing until dark, going to bed late at night, sleeping in every morning. Now, in a very short time, the routine has to change. What can you do now to make going back to school a pleasure, not a nightmare of nagging and yelling, delaying and dawdling?

Starting school usually means two things to kids: First, a change from a slow summer pace to a getting-out-the-door-by-8-A.M. routine; and second, adjusting to a new classroom or school, teacher, friends and academic challenges. All parents want the morning routine to go smoothly, and their child equipped to manage any change presented without resistance or emotional upheaval.

Here are tips for getting kids ready for the new school year.

Changing Schools

Most kids can weather changes from one grade to the next easily, but jumping to first grade from kindergarten or from elementary school to middle school is more traumatic. Starting a new school in a new town is even more traumatic. Here you walk a fine line. On the one hand, exude confidence. Give your child the impression that he's fully qualified to manage any challenge the new year presents. At the same time, prepare him for stumbling blocks he might encounter. It's important to keep your sensitive parenting eyes open to unnecessary stress that might affect your child's academic performance.

TIPS

- Explain how school will be different this year from last year. If possible, visit the building, let your child find his classroom, the bathroom and playground. If visiting isn't possible, assure your son or daughter the teacher will guide him through the day.
- State your expectations. Make it clear that school is children's work, it's important. Let them know they're supposed to follow school rules, complete assignments and homework.
- Talk about feelings. Ask your child if he's excited or worried. Don't pooh-pooh those feelings or try to talk him out of them, but don't be controlled by them either. "I understand you're worried; starting school feels scary. Now it's time to get dressed, eat breakfast, then I'll walk you to the bus stop."
- Watch your own feelings. You may feel sad or fearful about your child going off to kindergarten or middle school. If your emotions are too obvious, however, you might spoil your child's enthusiasm for the first day.
- Exude confidence when saying good-bye. If Carl is one who might cry at the classroom door, prepare yourself. Don't waste time talking him into a happy face. Just walk him to the door and say this matter-of-factly: "I know you're frightened; Mrs. McBeth will take care of you." Now turn and walk bravely out

the door. Don't look back. Most children separate easily and after a few days, the tears subside.

- Expect tears or misbehavior after school. Beginning school is stressful. Kids must adjust to lots of change, which takes work and concentration. When they get home, they let down. Every child needs down time without pressure to act perfectly.
- Minimize extracurricular activities. Don't plan a heavy schedule with soccer, ballet and piano. Ease into additional activities to discover just how much your child can manage.
- Consistently develop the school time schedule. Each routine-- morning, after school, bedtime--can trip some families up. The more consistent you are at first, the quicker each routine is established. Plan for the morning routine first; getting everyone out the door with ease sets the tone for the entire day.

The Perfect Morning Routine

Most parents expect to offer lots of guidance with kindergartners, but the expectation for older kids is that they should move through the morning in a timely fashion. Unfortunately, some children need remedial lessons for getting out the door on time without resistance.

When that first day arrives, think of yourself as the getting-out-the-door coach. You're right there helping with socks and shoes, putting toothpaste on toothbrushes, handing each child his backpack and lunch box as he walks out the door. As the days go by, you'll back off and give only verbal and visual cues: "It's time to get your socks on; I'll watch you do it. You did it all by yourself; good for you." By thoughtfully withdrawing your support, you give your children the opportunity to grasp hold of their responsibilities.

TIPS

- Explain how life is going to change. A week prior to the first day, offer a precise description of the morning routine: "I'll wake you up at 7 o'clock, you need to be dressed by 7:30 for breakfast. I expect you ready with your backpack, lunch and coat to walk out the door at 8 o'clock." Young children need practice. For some, a pictorial chart including each step really helps.
- Start getting kids in bed early. Begin a week before school gets underway. You can't force them to sleep, but you can see they're snuggled in bed looking at books.
- Get yourself up and ready first. If you work outside the home, this step is crucial. All goes more smoothly those first days when you're available to guide your children each step of the way.
- Give reminders. Most kids learn to move through the morning routine in a timely fashion. Others need reminders until high school graduation: "Son, I think you forgot to brush your teeth."

- State the obvious. "Your coat is on, now put on your shoes." Later, give one-word directives. Just say "shoes," or ask, "What are you supposed to do next?"
- Avoid yelling and harsh treatment. Negative ingredients can quickly become embedded in the routine. No parent likes sending their child out the door after a screaming match.
- Tack on an additional task. Once the morning schedule becomes routine, you can add an element: throwing dirty clothes in the hamper, making beds, putting together lunches.