

8 Ways to Have the Healthiest School Year Ever!

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Switching gears from summer relaxation to a demanding school-year schedule can be somewhat of a shock for the whole family. Helping your child get off to the best possible start each year takes a whole lot of organization, and a little bit of luck—but a few simple steps can make a big difference all year long.



1. Plan for Sleep Success

No kid wants to turn in at a reasonable hour after a long, lazy summer of staying up later than usual. But research continually points to the importance of sleep to a child's health and academic success. For example, one recent study presented at a meeting of the Associated Professional Sleep Societies showed that **teenagers who have adequate sleep get better grades**—especially in math—than their sleep-deprived peers.

Ideally, grade school and high school kids should get a minimum of 10 hours of sleep a night, says Seema Csukas, M.D., Ph.D., medical director for child wellness at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta. Of course, you can't expect a child to go from a 9:30 p.m. summer bedtime back to a 8 p.m. one in a night. The solution: Start sending your child to bed 20 minutes earlier each night for a week or two before school begins. And don't be too concerned if he's extra wired the night before the big day. He'll settle back into the routine soon enough.

2. Create the Best Homework Space

Everyone has a unique organizational style. Marcella Moran, an educational consultant and coauthor of *Organizing the Disorganized Child*, suggests an effective method for setting up your child's workspace: Have her sit at her desk and clear it off. Have her name the essential items she needs to get her homework done, such as a pencil holder, calculator or stapler. Then ask her to close her eyes and place her hand where she'd naturally think to grab the items. Arrange the items accordingly, and—voilà!—your child has a **functional workspace**.

To make the **homework load** more manageable, break the evening's assignments into segments—either chunks of time (from 6:45 to 7:30, work on your science lab) or pages (read pages 2 through 6 in your history book). "The goal is for your child to feel successful and productive, not overwhelmed," says Moran.

3. Give Kids a Boost of Confidence

With all that a new school year brings—new teachers, higher academic expectations and, in some cases, a new school and new friends—it's no wonder many kids feel apprehensive.

If your youngster seems anxious, try to pin down what is worrying him, suggests Tamar Chansky, Ph.D., a clinical child psychologist and author of *Freeing Your Child from Negative Thinking*, and then troubleshoot accordingly. "If the school is unfamiliar, see if you and your child can stop in the week before to get a quick tour of the building and meet the teacher while she's setting up the classroom," says Chansky.

For kids who were teased or even bullied the previous year, give the teacher a heads-up so she can keep an eye out and nip any problems in the bud, if necessary. Help your child come up with some one-line zingers to use if he gets picked on, such as "Oh, thanks so much for noticing," if someone insults his appearance. Above all, reassure your youngster that no one will be allowed to hurt him, and instruct him to **tell a staff member if he ever feels unsafe**.

4. Make Mornings More Manageable

The key to a madness-free morning is to **prepare as much as you can the night before**. Have your child choose her outfit, pack her backpack and make a list of things she'll need the following day, such as sports equipment or dance shoes. Place any gear she'll take to school by the front door.

In the morning, **simplify breakfast** by offering a choice of two (and only two) food options. If your child is easily distracted, try to keep her from going back into her room once she's up and dressed. "Kids will start playing with something or want to change their clothes," says Moran. "It can become a black hole."

5. Be Savvy About Supplies

Need a boatload of notebooks, pencils and rulers for the year ahead? Bring your child along when shopping for **school supplies**. He's more likely to put pencils and erasers in his pencil case if he's picked them out, and choosing cool supplies gets kids excited about the year ahead. Have your child try on backpacks so he can pick one that's comfortable, with well-padded shoulder straps and the right kinds and number of zipped compartments and pockets. But when it comes to backpack storage, simpler is better, says Moran. "Many pockets make for lost items, especially with disorganized kids."

In addition, steer your child toward supplies that suit the way he likes to organize his schoolwork. For example, does he prefer one big binder that holds all his subjects, or one for morning classes and another for the afternoon? He'll be more invested in staying organized if he's helped create the system.

6. Hype the Hygiene

If your kid has gotten a bit lazy about basic hygiene over the summer, now is the time to give her a refresher course—before she's back in school and exposed to germs galore.

Remind her how important it is to **wash her hands with soap and water** before eating and after going to the bathroom. Limited access to soap and water? Tuck a small plastic container of hand sanitizer into her backpack. (It kills germs, but it doesn't get rid of visible dirt and grime.) Your youngster should also know to keep her hands out of her nose and mouth, and to sneeze into her sleeve rather than into her hand or the air.

7. Cultivate Connections

Kids whose parents are **involved in their school lives** fare better on all fronts, according to studies. "Your child should see you and his teachers as partners in a common cause," says Anne Rambo, Ph.D., a family therapist, associate professor at Nova Southeastern University in Fort Lauderdale, FL, and author of *I Know My Child Can Do Better!* Introduce yourself to the teachers on the first day, attend back-to-school night, and praise a teacher when she makes an extra effort on behalf of your child. "The parent who's involved gets more attention and respect from his children's teachers," says Rambo.

8. Keep 'Em Healthy

If your child has a serious condition, such as asthma, diabetes or an allergy, it's critical that school staff know how to manage symptoms and recognize when he or she needs emergency care. Make sure the school nurse and your child's teachers and coaches have a copy of a customized **action plan** that you develop with your child's doctor.

The plan should spell out symptoms to look for, types and dosages of medications to be administered and instructions on how to do this. (Have the pharmacist divide any prescription medications into two labeled bottles—if it's appropriate for the medication your child uses—one for home and one for school.) The plan should also indicate when the child's doctor needs to be called, and what to do in an emergency.

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