

# Back to School Dos and Don'ts

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Tips on navigating summer's end, especially for kids who are anxious

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The end of summer is in sight, and parents everywhere are feeling that inevitable anxiety over how to make the most of the [upcoming school year](#). In my experience, anticipating the hurdles of reentry and carefully structuring the first few weeks of school goes a long way to setting the stage for a successful year, particularly if your child has an [anxiety disorder](#) or another [psychiatric condition](#). With that in mind, here are some dos and don'ts for families who want to start the school year right.

## DO get back into the routine

There are many positive things about [summer](#), like more time to spend with your family and novel opportunities for your children. But summer is also a [disrupting time](#) for kids, who can easily forget that they were ever in school at all. So I strongly suggest that you start making the necessary readjustment to school life *before* the first day. There is no use denying that school is coming, and getting prepared earlier can get them off to a better start.

First, we want kids to start (and they're going to resist) having more school-like hours. Even just a few days before school begins, [bedtime](#) should go back from 11:00 to 9:00, for example, or whatever is appropriate. Additionally, kids should be waking up around the time they'd have to wake up for school and [performing the normal routine](#): [shower, breakfast, getting dressed](#), and so forth.

We also suggest that you [limit "screen time"](#)—whether it's a computer, the TV, or a handheld device—and make sure they are off at least an hour before bed. Kids sometimes have a hard time separating from their virtual world, and if they don't have some "downtime" they'll still be engaged and it will affect their ability to fall asleep on their own.

You can also shop for school supplies earlier rather than later. The selection at stores is better, which is no small matter when you're trying to make the [transition](#) as easy as possible, and the activity primes kids for their eventual return to the classroom.

## DON'T forget to refuel

When kids are with you, when you're both on vacation, you know [what and when they're eating](#), and if they're staying up late, it's likely to be [watching a movie with you](#). When school starts again, you lose some control, even if you don't realize it. You may assume that certain things are happening at school—or in your child's bedroom—and then wonder what in the world has gotten into your suddenly surly, [under-performing kid](#). Well, if they're not eating until they're starved, and they're on Facebook until midnight...

I encourage all my families to be particularly aware of meals. Most kids wake up at 6:30 or 7:00am and may or may not have breakfast. For younger grades, lunch could be anywhere from 10:30 to 1:00. Do we know what they're eating for lunch? Do they pack lunch or buy hot lunch? How much are they eating? Are they trading their sandwiches for cookies? Are they having a snack during [afterschool activities](#)? If they're not having a snack, they could be coming home ravenous at 5:00pm, not be able to focus on [homework](#) for an hour, then get all of the days calories and nourishment at dinner and feel exhausted and have little mental energy for work. Then they get a second wind and are online into the wee hours.

The fact is that a well-fed, good sleeper is going to have a better school day and be more efficient with homework than a kid who's over-tired and starving.

## **DO talk about changing friendships**

Summer can be a volatile time for young friendships, and talking about what to expect when school starts is a good way to ease kids into the idea that social relationships change. Sometimes [your BFF one year may seem a little distant the next year](#), and letting kids know this sort of thing happens can help them weather these often-painful changes. Being able to share friends with other children, and to have friends overlap, is a skill that's important to learn, which is why it's something that warrants discussion. Not all problems need fixing; sometimes kids just want to be able to talk about these upsets without expecting you to fix them; sometimes kids just want parents to validate their feelings and say, "I know that's hard."

## **DON'T share your anxieties**

[Parents are often very caught up in their children's social lives](#) because they want them to make good friends, be happy, and learn social skills that will help them be successful adults. These are all great reasons to be engaged, but kids don't always understand the interest that way. This is particularly true of anxious kids.

For instance, it's very easy for parents to get into the habit of asking, "Did you make any friends?" when kids come home from school. But that can be shaming for kids who are struggling or still figuring out where they fit in. Better questions would be, "How was your day?" or "Tell me three things you liked about your day," or "Tell me three things you didn't like about your day." Neutral questions are better than ones that a child might interpret as, "If you didn't make friends, then I'm going to be disappointed in you."

## **DO have a trial run**

One way to help kids get off on the right foot—or at least a better foot—is to give kids with anxiety problems, and certainly kids who have [refused to go to school](#) in the past, a "dry run" or two before school starts. Driving by the building, walking in the building, getting reacquainted with the smells, sights, and sounds; this can be necessary to make day one happen at all.

Trial runs are also really good for kids transitioning to a new school. Kids who are going from elementary to middle, or middle to upper, have an orientation, but it usually takes place at the end of the previous year. So it's good to go and take a dry run and map out your classes, know where your locker is and that kind of thing. And if a kid puts up a fight and refuses to do that, it could be a red flag that this year will be problematic. But at least you've figured this out before school starts.

## **DON'T be afraid of setbacks**

If you have a child who had some real trouble the year before—like a mood or anxiety problem—and may have made real gains over the summer, you might be tempted to anticipate an easy return to school. But it's good for parents to temper expectations. Too often we think our children have learned all these new skills and so day one, two, and three should be stellar days. If not, then something's wrong. But that's not how it works. We have to let kids ease into it, and allow for ups and downs. If you are a dedicated parent and your child is receiving proper care, they'll improve—but it's not always a straight line going up. If you can accept that, then your child will have more [confidence](#) and be able to accept setbacks.

## **DO help kids manage their commitments**

The tricky part of coming back to school is that the first week or two are usually pretty exciting but slow weeks in terms of work, so it's easy to get caught up in a false sense of, “Oh, this is easy, and I can take on this, this, and that extracurricular.” Then, October comes along and a kid can think, “Holy crap, I have a lot of work in front of me and where am I going to find the time?” So it might be a good idea to wait on *new* activities until mid-October and leave enough time for adjustment.

The fact is that these days kids tend to get over-involved in clubs, sports, student government, and by the time they get home, they're exhausted. Maybe by the time they start homework, it's nine o'clock, only two hours before bedtime at 11:00. I've worked with many [kids who get overwhelmed by their activities](#), and then they get further and further behind in their work, which makes them [depressed](#) and prone to procrastinate. It just becomes too much for them to handle. We want parents to temper their expectations for kids, so that kids can practice balance in their own lives; modeling this in your own life can be helpful. For example, you could explain to your child that you were asked to join a fundraising committee but you said no because you realized that you would be overcommitted. Practicing what you preach, and letting your kids see, can be worth a thousand stern reminders.

## **DON'T ignore problems**

To flog this point one more time: Many schools are fantastic, with talented and caring teachers and administrators. But you can't expect the school to have your insight into your child, or to automatically have the same concerns and knowledge about them. Sometimes the school's point of view is, “We're not going to do anything until we see a reason to do something.” That's why we'd like parents to be more proactive. [You need to be your child's advocate](#), and if you see them struggling, or you're worried about them struggling, it's better to say something sooner rather than later.

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