



Coping with Back-To-School Blues

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"Have you finished your homework?" "It's a school night. Time to get ready for bed."
"Mom, where is my assignment book?" "Drop-off is at 4:30. Pick-up is at 8:30." "Save dinner for me. I'll eat after practice." "Hurry up. You're going to be late for the bus." "I need lunch money." "Don't forget to sign the emergency care forms." "My teacher yelled at me today." "My friends are all in the other class!"

And THAT was the dialogue in my house just YESTERDAY! What a change from the summer when everything is so much looser. No deadlines or early bedtimes. No extra-curricular activities interrupting family time. No nagging over homework and hurrying to turn in forms. I don't know about you, but I'm feeling blue. I'm not ready to let go of the ease of summer. I can feel the pressures and requirements of school ratcheting up the stress level at home.

This brings me to the critical question: How can I make this annual transition back to school easier for myself and my family? Here's what I've come up with:

1. Maintain the Illusion of Summer. We still have several more weeks of temperate weather ahead. Let's enjoy it. Light up those BBQs. Eat outdoors. You may choose to follow the edict 'no white after Labor Day,' but nobody says you can't hold on to a few more dog days of summer while it lasts. Get out there and enjoy!

2. Develop Strict Routines. Bedtime: All children need structure, predictability, and SLEEP. Now is the time to get back to your child's basic routine. Set a bedtime and stick with it. Make sure your child has plenty of time to get ready for bed BEFORE bedtime. Some children need 45 minutes just to prepare for bed. Remember: You are in charge of making sure your child gets into bed and turns out the lights. After that, it's up to your child to fall asleep.

Morning routine: Like many of us, you may struggle in getting your child out the door in the morning. There are a couple of things you might try that have helped me: 1) Wake up several minutes before your children do so that you have a few minutes to read the paper and have your first cup of coffee. This helps prepare you for what lies ahead. 2) Encourage the kids to have lunches made and backpacks by the door the night before so they are ready to walk out the door in the morning. 3) Avoid TV (or any other screen

time) in the morning before school. 3) Help your child get in the habit of picking her/his clothes out the night before. 4) Refrain from last minute homework in the morning.

3. Family Dinners and Family Calendars. Family dinners are vital ways to reconnect with your children after hectic school days and after-school activities. Research says that teens who regularly have meals with their family are more likely to have better academic performance and less likely to get involved with drugs or become depressed. Make every effort to get together for family dinners despite crazy schedules. Update and post a family calendar in a prominent place in your kitchen. Review the calendar on Sunday evening as part of a family meeting. The calendar will help you stay on track with family dinner times as expectations for participation are spelled out in advance.

4. Unplug! Your children are going to hate me for saying this: Take cell phones and private computer use away from your children after school. Give them back when homework is finished. I can't tell you how often parents complain to me about how distracted their children are by texting and Facebook. But when I suggest removing these distracting elements, they look at me as if I had three heads! Please remember that these items are privileges, not entitlements. It will help you if your computers are kept in a public space in the house so that you can monitor homework time vs. Facebook/entertainment time. Keep the TV turned off until after dinner and homework is complete. Is it any wonder that kids complain of boredom and struggle to complete their homework when they are constantly blasted with highly stimulating messages and images of one form or another? After the summer, your kids may go through some form of texting or screen time withdrawal. As you set limits on these activities, you may be in for a rough road of whining, complaining, and even yelling. Hang in there. It's far easier to get looser with privileges as the academic year unfolds than the other way around.

5. Observe Quiet Time. Ask all family members to observe a clearly delineated hour or so of peace and quiet in the evening when everybody reads, studies, or does school work. This creates an atmosphere of calm. It's easier to maintain focus on school work when the whole family is respectful and focused.

6. Take Advantage of Communication Opportunities. Pick up on your child's communication signals and go with their flow. If you have one of those children that "never talks to you," pay attention when he/she wants to share with you. For example, if your teenager talks most when he's trapped in the car with you, turn off the radio and listen. If bedtime opens up the lines of communication, get your child in bed a little early so that you can have time to talk.

We may not have control over the passage of time, but there are ways that we can go into this fall and winter with a more relaxed style, creating an environment where our children can grow and flourish.