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Making This School Year Your Child's Best Ever

When the school year starts, your child will probably return fearing math class, the lunchroom mystery meat and being labeled a geek for wearing clothes that went out of fashion last week. A child starting kindergarten or first grade will also fear isolation, not making friends and being unable to find the restroom.

"Make sure those first-day-of-school blues are avoided," says Melitta Cutright, Ph.D., former communications director for the National PTA and author of "Growing Up Confident: How to Make Your Child's Early Years Learning Years."

Whatever age your child is, you can help alleviate first-day jitters by helping the student plan for a new school year. "You'll reinforce the importance of school and make the worries of a new school year less traumatic," Dr. Cutright says.



But remember: The amount of planning help a student wants differs by education level. An elementary-schooler needs plenty of help, while a middle-schooler expects a bit more freedom. An older student might not want Mom and Dad to make any fuss, but parents should find ways to stay involved because high school presents more choices; from deciding which classes to take to choosing after-school activities.

Here's how you can prepare your child for a new school year:

Two weeks before the school year begins again, start getting your child back in the habit of going to bed, rising and eating meals at set times. All youngsters need time to adjust to school schedules after summer activities.

Make a special trip to the store to buy school supplies; let the back-to-schooler pick out a backpack or lunch box.

Make a side trip to a clothing store and buy your child a new outfit for the first day.

On a calendar, start counting down the days till school begins.

Plan a special back-to-school dinner with your child's help. Rise early and prepare a favorite breakfast on the first day of school.

Familiarity helps

It's especially important for a young student to be familiar with new surroundings. Parents often forget how frightening change can be to children. To quell any fears of going to a new school:

- Drive by the school and point it out to your child.
- On another day, take the child to the school and walk around. Play on the playground and look in classrooms and the lunchroom.
- If the child will walk to school, walk the route with him or her at least one morning or afternoon. Walk to the bus stop if the youngster will ride the bus.

- Go to the school's open house so the youngster can meet the teacher and other students in a relaxed setting.
- Familiar faces are reassuring on the first day.

Homework rules

The real work begins when school starts. It's a given that children will always hate doing homework no matter what parents say or do. But these suggestions should help with the battle between study and Nintendo.

- Establish a nonnegotiable, daily homework time. A child should read or work on a personal project on days no homework is assigned.
- Establish a quiet place for study. Some children do as well on the living-room floor as they do at a desk in the bedroom.
- Ask about assignments and whether the child understands them. Help if necessary, but don't do the work.
- Always show interest in the child's education. Don't ask, "How was school?" You're likely to get little more than "OK." Instead, ask about the day's math lesson or problems on a dreaded test. Know the books being read, the papers being written and the projects being assigned.

"Do all that," Dr. Cutright says, "and you'll make the school experience more enjoyable for you and your child."

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