Tips for Transitioning Back to School

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It seems as though summer break just started and yet a new school year is right around the corner. What can we do as parents and caregivers to help our children transition back into the routine of a new school year? How can we help ease anticipatory anxiety for an anxious child? What can we do to strengthen the mental health of our adolescents dealing with increased academic pressure and social stress? Here are some helpful tips for making the transition back to school as seamless as possible.

For All School Age Children

Reestablish a good sleep routine now! Don't wait until the night before school resumes to try and get to bed on time. It won't work! Sleep is habitual. If your child's sleep routine has transitioned to something closer to being nocturnal, start easing back their bedtime by 15-30 minutes each night starting today! Remember most children need somewhere between 8 and 11 hours of sleep at night. Especially teenagers.

Set the alarm clock early. This will help them fall asleep more quickly and make those early morning school wake ups a little easier. Do not wait until the first day of school to try and get up early!

Set a predictable routine for school days. Have a set place for backpacks, homework completion, lunch boxes, snacks, water bottles, spare pencils, and shoes. Practice getting out the door in the mornings! Each night, have a routine for making sure things are ready to go first thing.

Discuss time and transportation expectations with your child. For example, "Set your alarm for 6:00. Shower, brush your teeth, and get dressed. Have breakfast and your shoes on and be ready for the bus by 6:45." Plan when baths or showers will take place. Give your child as much autonomy as reasonable for their age and developmental level. Stick to your preset bedtime.

Ensure meals, snacks, and down-time are part of your child's daily routine. It may be helpful to pause after school for a snack and a little time to unwind before jumping into homework. This is especially true for children who find school overwhelming or who are more introverted or shy.

Try to avoid over-committing your child's after school time. Sports and clubs are wonderful! But it is easy to forget that children need down time after school just as much, or more, than adults do! Over committing your child may result in exhaustion, emotional instability, sleep issues, and performance issues. Find a balance that allows for studies, extracurricular activities, and restful activities for your child.

Talk with your child about age-appropriate safety issues. Who can pick up your child? Does your family have a "code word" to ensure the person should be picking up your child?

For The Anxious Or School Avoidant Child

Talk about their concerns about the new year. Reflect on any positives from the past year.

Let them help pick school supplies and prepare items for the new year. Let them pack or help pack their backpack so they know where things go.

Show them the school and practice the plan for

pick up and drop off.

Go to meet the teacher activities and allow them to ask questions about the teacher, classroom, and daily routine.

Inquire about any friends in the classroom and let your child know.

Aim to have a predictable school day schedule whenever possible. Discuss changes with your child when you can. Routines, as mentioned in the previous section, are very helpful for reducing daily anxiety.

Discuss the school day and highlight the positives. Discuss things that could have been better. Give your child space to share their concerns without trying to fix it.

Ensure they have downtime after school. Children who are anxious may be especially tired after a long day at school. Create a quiet restful space for them to unwind before jumping into other activities.

Be predictable and accessible to your child. Knowing you will be there and that you care about them instills a sense of safety.

For middle and high schoolers:

Remind them the importance of sleep at this stage! Reinforce this with established bedtimes.

Set media restrictions to ensure sleep hours are protected. Keep electronic devices in a central location in the home at night so they do not interfere with your child's sleep.

Set expectations and a routine for hygiene. Ensure they have hygiene items they need, especially if they aren't likely to ask for them or think they need them.

Help them establish time management and accountability with assignments early on. This will likely mean checking on grades and assignments frequently in the early part of the school year.

Set an expectation for homework or daily study time if needed. This reinforces you care about their academic performance and are available to help.

Talk with them regularly about their friends or struggles at school. Listen non-judgmentally and do not jump to offer advice. Who is important to them? What is going well this year? What do they wish they could change? Showing an interest in the small details of their day will make them more comfortable coming to you when there are bigger issues in their lives.

Whatever age or situation your child may be navigating this school year, give it a little time. It takes the average young child about a month, and the average teenager about two months, to adjust to a new academic year. As the parent, you may also experience increased stress as the family sets new routines and adjusts to the increased demands of a busy schedule. This is normal and you will likely find your stride as a family as the weeks pass into another school year.