

Handling the Back-to-School Rush

•Before school starts•Getting organized at home•Planning up for sick days and emergencies

Late summer and early fall can be a challenging time for busy families as children and adults alike readjust to the school calendar. Shifting gears will be easier if you plan ahead for schedule changes and possible emergencies.

Before school starts

Going back to school after summer vacation is a big adjustment for most kids. You can help your child by taking a few steps that will ease the adjustment to the new routine.

Try to return from vacation or camp at least two or three days before school starts. Children and teenagers need to make both physical and mental adjustments when they go back to school. A few days of "breathing room" after vacation or summer camp lets them ease into the changes that they'll be facing.

Help your children start getting to bed earlier the week before school begins. Many children and teenagers get so used to staying up late that they have problems getting up in the morning when school starts. Getting to bed earlier and waking up earlier in the mornings will help them readjust their body clocks.

Start limiting TV and screen time and brush up on reading and math skills. For many children, the structure required for homework is a big adjustment. It may be easier for them if you start limiting TV and screen time, and setting aside daily time for learning activities.

Visit or revisit a new school. If your child or teenager will be starting a new school, try to visit it before the first day of classes. Familiarize your child with the location of classrooms, the cafeteria, bathrooms, library, and gym. If your child is new to the school, ask about connecting with an alumni family before school starts.

Check the websites for your children's schools. These sites may have announcements, including last-minute changes, important reminders, bus schedules, supply lists, lunch menus with signups for pre-paid lunch accounts, and upcoming events. Search online for your school district and their website, and consider signing up for alerts to keep you up to date.

If possible, consider working a shorter day on the first day of school to ease the transition. This will allow you to see your child off to school in the morning and to be there after school to talk about the first day's events.

Call your childcare provider at least a week before school starts to review your arrangement. Plan for the times when you know you'll need backup care. Get the school calendar and check the dates for vacations, holidays, and early-release days. Ask about your provider's availability on these days.

Know the school bus route and schedule. Some younger children find it reassuring to walk to the school bus stop a few times and to see the bus route and drop-off spot at school. Drive along the route and show your child the landmarks along the way, clearly noting your child's bus stop. Put a card in a younger child's backpack with the bus number on it as a reminder and include your phone number so that you can be contacted if your child takes the wrong bus home.

Make a list of things you need to do before school starts. Your children may want to make their own "To Do" list.

Go over new arrangements and routines with your family before school starts. Talk about carpool or transportation plans, before- and after-school arrangements, and any new childcare providers.

Label everything that your child will be taking to school. Put labels in coats, backpacks, and lunch boxes. Remember, your child's name should not be visible on the outside of their clothing, as this could put their safety at risk.

Prepare preschoolers for the coming changes. You may need to explain that their older siblings won't be home all day now that school is starting, but that your family will still be able to do many things together after school and on weekends.

Getting organized at home

Put up a family calendar in a central place. Jot down key items, using different colours for each person. Talk about upcoming events each week with family members. Consider an online calendar that adults and teens can access from any device.

Give each family member a place to store things for school and work, preferably any spot near the door. Prepare lunch money and pack parts of lunches in advance to avoid the morning rush.

Designate a quiet spot for each child to do their homework. Be sure the study space is clutter-free and organized with needed school supplies for the coming year.

Prepare for the incoming school paperwork. Set up a filing system to help organize school papers and forms you'll need to fill out, such as kids' sports forms and important handouts from the teacher.

Pick out clothes the night before. You and your children will have less hectic mornings if you pick out clothes the night before. To make getting dressed easier for younger children, you might put a hook on the back of their closet doors and encourage them to hang the next day's clothes there.

Planning up for sick days and emergencies

Work out before- and after-school care and backup care. Talk with friends, relatives, and other parents who may be willing to offer, share, or trade care. Find out if you can count on them for occasional backup care. Friends and family may be your only option if your child is mildly ill. Offer to help them in return when you're off work.

Know your options at work. Go over your company's policies regarding time off, sick day, and family leave so you'll know how much flexibility you have in an emergency.

Plan for backup or drop-in care needs. Some centres provide care for extra children as an extension of their regular services. See if your regular childcare provider or sitter can suggest or help you find substitute care. Ask your child's school if any childcare is available on site before or after school, or if any childcare centres drop off or pick up students before and after school.

Work out any carpool or transportation arrangements. Make these arrangements as early as possible to avoid last-minute surprises.

Make sure that your children will always have your phone numbers with them at school and activities. If you're often away from a phone, tell children how to reach you in an emergency or give them the name of an available friend or relative.

Review the school's policies. In case you need to communicate with your child or if they should need to contact you during the school day, you should be mindful of their school's phone and Internet policies.

Finally, talk with your children about what they look forward to and what concerns they may have about the new school year. Are they worried that they won't like their teachers or will find it hard to make friends? Is your child sad to be starting school without a friend who moved away or will be going to a different school? Offer as much reassurance as you can, and let your child know that you will always be there to provide support. If you feel your child's emotional concerns are more significant or long-standing, it would be helpful to set up an appointment with the teacher, school psychologist, or school counsellor to plan supports for the coming year.

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Vicky Youmans
Counselor

Vicky Youmans, MS, CEAP, AFC® is a Certified Employee Assistance Professional with a master's degree in marriage and family therapy.