

# School Daze

Do “Back to School” preparations make your head spin?  
We can help.

by Kate Winn

**W**e’ll be “Back to School” in a flash and that means a dizzying array of parenting challenges: breaking summer habits, shopping for the best bargains, organizing the house and the kids, packing lunches (sigh!) and dealing with homework and school issues.

Here are some great ideas to make your many tasks more manageable and get your child’s (and your own!) school year off to a terrific start.

## Get Back on Track

As the lazy days of summer wind down, it’s important to get little ones (and not so little ones) ready for the change of pace.

- ★ *Adjust sleep and wake times.* Move towards the school schedule as September approaches. With four kids to manage, Jason likes to start the process at the beginning of August. “I adjust the schedule by only five or 10 minutes every day, so my kids barely notice the change,” he says. “But they are on schedule by the time school starts.”
- ★ *Rein in the grazing.* Remember there are set snack and lunch times at school. Don’t be surprised if your child is suddenly hungry at exactly 10:15 a.m. on weekends!
- ★ *Begin to eat dinners as a family again.* Dinners can be casual over the summer months – everybody eats when and where they want. But as school time approaches, family dinners are important. “It’s the best time to get caught up with your kids and encourage open communication,” says Krista, a teacher and mom of two.
- ★ *Establish a rule about screen time.* Decide before school begins (e.g., one hour per night) and stick to it! Ditto, rules around homework (see sidebar).

## Calm Jitters

Whether new to the school setting or just out of practice, some children may benefit from extra reassurance before the first day.

- ★ *Visit the school beforehand if possible.* Take a walk down the corridors, peep into the classrooms, play in the schoolyard, and chat about what’s ahead to help your child feel more comfortable.
- ★ *Take a practice walk or ride to school.* Mom Amanda used this technique when her youngest child started school last year. “It helps familiarize you and your child with the route and timing, which can eliminate that one piece of stress.” (Or book your child for a “First Bus Ride” program.)
- ★ *Arrange a play date with schoolmates.* Before my oldest daughter started JK, I held a party in August with a “back to school” theme for her new female classmates (we asked the school to forward the invitations). It was a big success and a great way for the girls (and parents) to get to know each other.

## Shop Around

You are about to be bombarded with back to school shopping ads, reminding you of all the things you need to purchase before school starts. How can you stock up while saving both time and money?

- ★ *Shop year-round for deals.* Last April, Kim scored a couple of backpacks at 60% off for her two kids. But remember, buying early can have its drawbacks. “The pants you buy in June may not be long enough come November – speaking from experience!”
- ★ *Involve your kids.* You want to make sure the item is worn/used, says Kim. “Ten year old girls definitely know what they like!” For younger kids, buy



Photo: Gerrit Weatherbee



second hand, suggests Jason. “We took our daughter to Value Village before she started kindergarten last year and gave her \$20 to spend, and she found five shirts and five pairs of pants!”

- ★ **Delay clothing purchases.** Buy a “first day” outfit in advance but the rest of the fall/winter wardrobe later. Clothing goes on sale after school starts!
- ★ **Wait for a supply list from the school.** Don’t spend money on supplies that may not be needed, advises Krista. Items like binders are required in some schools, but discouraged in others. “The dollar store is a great place to buy supplies, but steer clear of poor quality items, like pencils that don’t sharpen properly.”
- ★ **Don’t skimp on some items.** A sturdy, ergonomic backpack (choose a lightweight model with two padded shoulder straps and a waist belt) and a roomy, insulated lunch box are essential, and worth investing in.

## Start Organizing

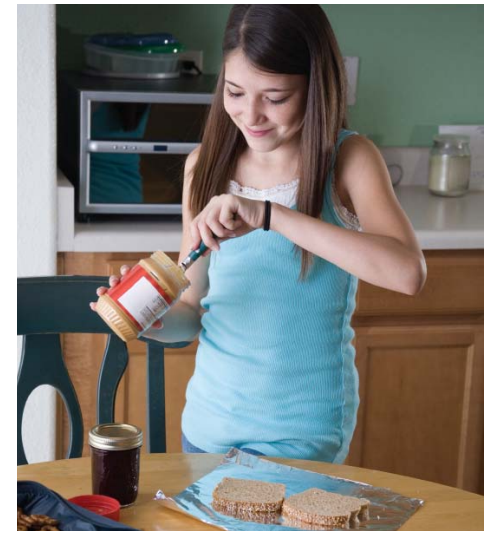
Here are some ways to control the inevitable clutter of school items and paperwork, and get everyone ready and out the door on time.

- ★ **Have designated areas for everything.** That means mats or racks for shoes, hooks for coats and backpacks, and a drop zone, such as a special basket on the kitchen counter, for agendas and paperwork. With three kids, mom Sally has designated “a drawer for each child where they can empty backpacks, schoolbooks, and library books. That way, there are no frantic searches – we know where everything is.”
- ★ **Use visual schedules for younger kids.** A list of responsibilities, such as get dressed, make your bed, brush teeth, with corresponding pictures, will remind them of what they are supposed to do. Post it on the fridge or in their rooms. Use stickers or rewards as motivators.
- ★ **Rely on a family calendar, timers, and clocks.** These tools will help keep everybody on track. Kids’ clocks range from “light up when it’s time to get up” models for the littlest ones, to iPod-connected alarm clocks for sleep-loving teens.
- ★ **Make getting dressed easy for young kids.** Put together complete outfits for a week, including accessories, and hang them in your child’s closet. Let her choose each day’s outfit.

## Simplify Lunches

Making school lunches is the bane of many parents’ existence, but it must be done. Here are some ways to make the chore a bit easier.

- ★ **Share the job.** As soon as your kids are old enough, begin handing over the lunch-mak-



ing responsibilities. Even kindergarten students can select a piece of fruit, juice box and snack items. Kids are also more likely to eat items they’ve chosen themselves.

- ★ **Use leftovers.** “We always pack lunches right after supper, and try to incorporate leftovers as much as we can” says Sally. “Thankfully, my kids love cold pizza!”
- ★ **Take advantage of hot lunch programs.** “I hate making lunches,” says Jason, “and with new healthy eating policies, I know that school hot lunch programs have to meet certain nutritional guidelines. Just do what you can afford. Even if it’s one day per week, that’s one night per week you don’t have to worry about what to pack for lunch!”
- ★ **Buy a set of containers for each child.** Too many containers makes the packing job much more complicated. Purchase sets that are good quality and durable, then label them with the child’s name.

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## Tips For a Successful School Year

Ensure your child’s success by paying attention to:

### Punctuality

- ✓ Make sure that your child is at school on time! Chronic lateness can have a huge impact on grades.

### Homework

- ✓ Set a regular time for homework. Some kids do it as soon as they get in (helpful if they have activities after dinner). Others play after school and get back in work mode after supper. Choose what’s best for your family.
- ✓ Provide time, space, materials, encouragement and assistance ... but refrain from doing the work! Teachers want to see what your child knows. Write a note to the teacher if your child is struggling or spending too much time on her homework.

### Assignments & Tests

- ✓ Try not to “rescue” your child from failure. Instead, allow him to face the consequences of not studying for tests or not handing assignments in on time. If he needs help with time management or study skills, talk to the teacher.

### School Life

- ✓ Be sure to talk to your child about what is happening at school. Many parents recommend asking for the rose (high) and thorn (low) to get kids thinking and sharing. You’ll be surprised what you can learn about your child’s daily joys, as well as her concerns about assignments, grades, bullying, etc.

### Home/School Communication

- ✓ Introduce yourself to the teacher to establish a

positive rapport before any issues arise. “Last year, one mom came in with some cut flowers,” says teacher Karen. “What a great way to start the year!”

- ✓ Keep the school informed about important information such as custody arrangements, medications, and allergies.
- ✓ Read and sign the agenda/planner every night. Teachers notice! The agenda keeps you informed about homework and upcoming assignments. And it’s the best place to jot notes to the teacher about early pick-ups, field trips, etc.
- ✓ Speak positively about staff and subjects in front of your children.
- ✓ Attend events like meet the teacher night and fun fair to show your child how much you care about his education.