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Time for School

Advice on how to transition from a laid-back summer to a hectic academic year.



Kindergarten coordinator Cathy Gibert of the Norwood School in Potomac leads a class discussion. The final days of summer break can be an ideal time to refresh reading and math skills. Photo Courtesy of James Kegley.

By Marilyn Campbell

August 16, 2012

When Ellen Feldman's 5-year-old son started school for last fall, one of the biggest adjustments for the single mother of two was having to adhere to a schedule.

"All of a sudden we went from being able to do things on our own time frame to having to wake up and be at a certain place at a certain time," said Feldman. "Sending my son

off to school for the first time was exciting, but also difficult.”

From purchasing school supplies and new clothes to reuniting with friends and leaving home for the first time, the start of a new school year can bring about emotions that range from delight to anxiety.

“Back to school, which is a positive experience, has stress built into it,” said Linda Guly, a professor of psychology at Marymount University in Arlington. “Any change is stressful, even a positive change. But kids will adapt quickly.” The transition, said experts, is more manageable when parents develop a plan before the first day of classes.

“The more structure parents can give their kids before school starts, the better,” said professional organizer Cecilia Anderson, a former teacher and the owner of Splendidly Organized, Inc. in Vienna. “If kids are given total free rein during the summer, they are not going to be in the right mindset for school.”

Michele Claeys, associate head and middle school principal at the Norwood School in Potomac, Md., believes that final days of summer break can be an ideal time for an academic brush-up: “There are often skills that aren’t used throughout the summer, but are important as school starts. Having children of all ages read as much as possible for pleasure throughout the summer, but also in the days leading up to the start of school, is a good idea because it is a sustained experience where they are focused on something for a long period time.” Claeys also recommended giving children an opportunity to discuss their reading with friends.

EXPERTS ALSO SUGGEST establishing a sleep routine with a consistent bedtime. “If parents get started a full week ahead of time trying to get children into the routine of being awake and alert for the morning, it gives them a chance to get their bodies adjusted to the schedule that they will have to maintain for the whole year,” said Claeys.

Reintroducing a back-to-school morning ritual can be an anxiety-inducing exercise for



Photo Courtesy of James Kegley

Students at the Norwood School in Potomac work in the Lower School computer lab. Education experts say the start of a new school year can be both exciting and stressful.

‘But I Don’t Want to Go to School’

Separation Anxiety and Other Resistances to School

“Separation anxiety is a natural and healthy emotion,” said Linda Guly, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at Marymount University in Arlington.

“Developmental theory will say when children have separation anxiety, it is a sign that they are attached to the parent. That is a good sign.”

some, especially after two months without a rigid agenda. According to professional organizers, a tactical plan can make the daybreak drill more pleasant.

“Do as much as you can the night before. For parents who pack their kids lunches, it is important to have things ready to go and put in bags,” said Anderson. For children who want the freedom of packing their own lunches, Anderson recommended dividing lunch options into food groups and allowing children to select one item from each group.

“You want to give your child a balanced meal,” she said. “One day there might be tuna sandwiches, and turkey sandwiches on another day, and whatever snack goes along with it like cut-up vegetables. Have those ready to go and in bins and let children choose one thing from each bin. That way kids will have more ownership over their lunches and there will be few complaints.”

Don’t underestimate the importance of breakfast either: “A child won’t have all faculties for learning if they haven’t eaten well,” said Anderson. “Some kids don’t have lunch until 1 o’clock, so to go from 6 a.m. until 1 o’clock without food is tough. They need something that has protein. It doesn’t have to be home-cooked eggs. It can be turkey sausages or lunchmeat, but a bag of chips and a monster drink is not a good breakfast.”

TO AVOID a last-minute morning search for errant permission slips or stray report cards, Vienna-based professional organizer Susan Unger of ClutterSOS urges parents to create a command center, a central location where all papers that must be signed and returned to school are kept. She adds that a chart outlining the morning tasks is another useful tool: “If children have a check list to look at, they can ask themselves, ‘Have I brushed my teeth?’ or ‘Have I combed my hair?’ The night before, choose clothes and put the backpack by the door.”

Use a family calendar. “Another important thing is having a calendar that lists activities and sporting events and putting it in a place where everybody can see it and everybody knows the schedule,” said Unger. “It also helps



Photo Courtesy of Marymount University

Linda Gulyn, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at Marymount University says that any change — including a return to school — can be stressful.



Photo Courtesy of James Kegley

Science teacher Karen Schulien of the Norwood School in Potomac teaches a group of kindergarten students. Education experts encourage parents to establish a sleep routine before school starts.

to color-code the calendar, so have one color for each child.”

Before heading out to purchase new supplies or clothes for school, organizers suggest taking inventory. “You can see what you already have and what you need and make a shopping list from that,” said Unger.

One of the most important components of creating a good start to a new school year is attitude, education experts agree. “Generally, it is helpful if parents help children see school as a fun, happy place where they can be stimulated and learn,” said Claeys.



Photo Courtesy of Splendidly Organized

Cecilia Anderson, a former teacher and the owner of Splendidly Organized in Vienna, encourages parents to begin creating a structured schedule for their children before the start of school.

“The more structure parents can give their kids before school starts, the better.”

—Cecilia Anderson



Photo Courtesy of Michele Claeys

Michele Claeys, associate head and middle school principal at the Norwood School in Potomac encourages parents to help children see school as a fun place in which to learn.



Photo Courtesy of ClutterSOS

Vienna-based professional organizer Susan Unger of ClutterSOS tells parents to create a color-coded calendar that includes each family member's events and activities.