

Getting Off to a Good Start at School Ruth A. Peters, Ph.D.

We all want a smooth transition from summer to school, but face it folks, that's probably not going to happen! The time for staying up late, sleeping in, wearing PJ's most of the day and hanging out with friends is quickly coming to an end as summer wanes and the back-to-school sales are in full force. So, whether your child is attending grade-, middle- or high school there are some areas and issues that need to be dealt with, discussed and delegated as school winds up again. Ready? Let's take a look at what you can do *now* to help your child get off to a good start at school!

Set expectations reasonably and wisely:

Early morning expectations

Start *now* by slowly lowering the bedtime at night so that the alarm clock will not seem to ring so early the following morning. Even if your child does not, at this time, need to get up early do begin this regimen to get their body clock back into sync with the school bus schedule and the responsibilities that need to take place before leaving the house in the morning. Review whether showers will be taken at night or first thing in the morning, and I suggest that brushing teeth and hair, getting fully dressed (including shoes and socks) all occur before coming to the breakfast table. Parents "lose" their kids at breakfast as they memorize the back of the cereal box, so let's get work (dressing) completed before play (box-reading) and nix the television or electronic games before school. Also, consider the new school dress codes that are arriving this fall when shopping at the mall--many schools are putting the kibosh on sleeveless tops and shorts that end more than 2 inches above the knee. Check your local school district's website for specifics so that you don't waste money on clothing that can't be used. The point of *planning ahead* in terms of getting ready on time is to lower the early morning drama that attacks almost all households the first few weeks of school—so think ahead, plan and set up the necessary structure for your children. A chart of what must be completed before breakfast, taped onto the refrigerator or bathroom mirror, will make it clear what needs to be accomplished so that your children to be ready on time.

Expectations regarding friends

Especially if your child hung around with some not-so-desirable buddies last school year, it's a good idea at *this* time to discuss a few folks who you will be discouraging your child having friendships with, but also focus on the ones that you trust and feel are good friends and role models for your children. Stress that your child's friends should be reasonably courteous, not get into trouble at school, take school seriously and receive at least average grades. Your child may balk at your "picking his friends for him", but you have the *right and the responsibility as a parent* to promote kids with good values and behaviors. Remember, who your child hangs around with at school may be out of your control, but you certainly hold the reins to after-school and weekend activities.

Expectations for grades, behaviors, detentions and the consequences that follow

This is an excellent point in the school year to review your grade expectations for your child. Consider previous years and gauge your child's true ability on past grades, teacher reports as well as standardized testing. And, then, raise the bar a bit. Numerous psychological studies have shown that kids who were expected by parents and teachers to perform higher than would be predicted from their actual intellectual tests do perform better—basically, if kids think that they can do it, they can! So, be specific--

”No grade below a B unless there is a specific problem that we are aware of and are working on” may fit your child, or a higher or lower expectation may be appropriate. Also discuss what consequences will occur at home if detentions, tardiness or school skipping occurs. These should be dealt with seriously, and home-based consequences such as weekend freedoms, electronics usage, bedtimes, curfews or allowances can be attached to behavior and performance at school.

Set up an effective and efficient organizational system:

A good organizational study skills system involves *four* parts which should be completed on a daily basis: the planner must be filled out for each class/subject (homework due, next test topic and date); all necessary materials to complete homework should be brought home; homework needs to be completed *cooperatively and accurately* before play or electronics use takes over the afternoon or evening; and the book bag needs to be readied for the next morning and placed at a specified location. A good motivator to accomplish this efficiently and accurately is that playtime and electronics only begin after all four steps have been checked by the parent as having been completed appropriately.

Discuss social issues or concerns with your child:

The glad-hander

Some kids are destined to become leaders, politicians and the life of the party and these youngsters often find socializing to be an easy and carefree activity. They have lots of friends in classes, at P.E., and throughout the hallways at school. They don't worry about who to sit with at lunch, in fact they yak too much and are the ones who give their teachers the gray hairs for fooling around in the classroom, passing notes, or cracking up their classmates with a really funny joke. If this is your child, you may have to have a firm discussion about the difference between being a fun, good student with lots of friends whom the teachers respect vs. the class clown whose mission is to entertain and not to learn. Let your child know that if notes come home about misbehavior then there will be serious consequences (affecting weekend privileges, allowance, electronics usage, clothing allowance, bedtime) to face at home.

The shy or anxious child

Many children, though, are concerned about not fitting in with others. All too soon, even by second grade in many schools, cliques are forming. The shy or somewhat socially anxious or awkward child may already be worrying about not fitting in, having someone to eat lunch with or not being picked for teams at P.E. Talk with your child about ways to

pick out classmates who were kind and friendly in previous years to buddy up with during the first week of school this year. Offer some fool-proof things to say to others that can't possibly be laughed at (the shy child's largest concern): "What did you do over the summer?" "Did you read the new Harry Potter book?" Hey, that's a really nice shirt, where'd you get it? "Oh, I like your haircut—it looks great!". Some children need ice-breakers and they may not be quick on their feet to come up with them. Role-play these possibilities so that your child will have some statements at the ready to use during awkward moments in that critical first week when cliques are beginning to form. Also talk to your child (especially those in middle or high school) about how it's probably best to "settle" for a less popular, but more kind and friendly, clique of kids. It's not fun always wondering whether the phone will ring or feeling that you're the one having to constantly do the inviting—kids want reciprocation from friends and I've found that a less popular group with similar interests as your child (drama, sports, band, honors classes) is often a genuinely better fit. Your socially anxious or awkward child deserves true friends that he or she can count on, and certainly doesn't need the cruel drama of constantly trying to fit in with the popular crowd.

Involvement with school and extracurricular activities:

Over-involvement

It's great when your child enjoys the school environment and wants to be in Key Club, sports teams, drama, band, newspaper or Students Against Drunk Drivers. All of these are good activities that teach, promote self-confidence and leadership skills as well as help the community. But, there is a limit. I know, I know, it's tough to grab a tiger by the tail and set some limits, especially when the kid is involved in good things. My general rule of thumb is that if the kid can pull it off (meaning continuing to achieve good grades, get a decent amount of sleep, truly enjoys the activities and her schedule does not drive the family nuts) then it's okay to continue. However, if any of these begin to fall short, then something has to give. Discuss with your child what is the most demanding of these activities and whether that can be compromised or altered. If not, then perhaps it can be deleted from the schedule this semester or year, and resumed when he or she is less stressed, or your schedule is more flexible. Many families with two or more children find that they have to limit after-school activities to only one per child. Remember, having dinner together (at home, and not via the drive-through window), some down time playing a board game or just some time to relax each night is great for the family soul!

Under-involvement

The opposite can occur, however, if your child is a bit of a slug and just wants to come home, bang out the homework and then couch- or mouse-potato for the remainder of the day. That child needs exercise, skill development and some community service to see how it feels to help others rather than being self-absorbed or addicted to the television, video games or instant messaging friends on the internet. Many parents have had to issue the declaration that "You will be involved in at least one after-school activity each semester—it could be Youth Group, a recreational or school sports team, or some type of lesson." I've found that kids who have developed interests seem to associate with creative and goal-oriented buddies and usually do better academically. In addition, they

tend to be less moody, emotional or depressed. So, if your child has couch potato tendencies start talking now about what activities he or she will join when school begins.

This is a lot to think about, but doing some planning and discussing up-front can save your child from poor grades, loneliness or behavioral problems once the school year begins. So, check out the school dress code, buy the supplies, but more important—have a heart-to-heart talk with your children about your expectations for grades, friends and activities as well as any fears or concerns that they may be worried about for the upcoming school year.