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Get Organized: A game plan for the school year

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When you think about the start of another school year, do frantic mornings come to mind? Can you hear it already?

"Where's my backpack."

"Where are my soccer shoes?"

"I don't want that for lunch."

"I missed the bus."

The start of the school year (or the rest of the year for that matter) doesn't have to be about frantic mornings. In fact, the school year can run smoothly (most days anyway) with the help of some simple strategies.

Routines

It all starts with routines. Here are a few ideas to help eliminate the daily chaos.

- Establish a routine for what needs to happen in the morning before school and another one for bedtime.
- Create a routine for what your children should do with his/her backpack, homework, papers that need a signature, leftover lunch, instruments, library books, sports equipments and so on.
- Ensure that each child has a dedicated location for each of the previously mentioned items. Having a routine without a place to store these items will lead to them dropping things by the door or leaving a trail through the house.
- Involve your children when creating the routines, so they believe they had a say and can manage what has been agreed upon.
- Post routines in visible locations, perhaps by the door they use when leaving the house. Posting them on the back of their bedroom door also is helpful. For children who are just starting to read, you can create lists with pictures or clip art.
- Have an established routine for what activities take place after school. Have a healthy snack ready. Maybe the routine in your house is no Wii, computer games or TV until homework and music practice is done -- or perhaps they get a set amount of unwind time to play and then do homework.

Here are some routines specifically to make mornings go better:

- Establish a lunch-making station with bags, napkins, plastic ware, etc. This could be a dedicated drawer or a basket that sits on a pantry shelf.
- Prep lunches the night before.
- For rushed days, have a basket of grab-and-go items for lunches, such as granola bars, crackers, etc.
- Prep clothes the night before or on Sunday for the entire week. A hanging sweater bag works well to store a weeks' worth of clothes.

Schedules

Schedules, just like routines will go a long way to keeping everyone on the same page and on time.

- Start talking about schedules two to three weeks before the start of classes to help ease the back-to-school transition.
- Establish a location for a family master calendar -- either paper or electronic -- that everyone can look at. As children get older, they can help to keep the calendar updated.
- If it's a paper calendar, post it on a magnetic strip or bulletin board near the kitchen.
- If your calendar is computer based, maybe you can place a laptop in a central location.
- When you get the school calendar, add all the important events for each child to a master calendar, including school holidays and half days.
- Avoid scheduling dentist and doctor appointments on test days.
- Plan chores by the week or month, and keep a chore chart or calendar so everyone knows who is responsible for what.

Preparing for school

There are several activities that you can be working on right now to help your family prepare for the upcoming school year. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Schedule a physical in the summer if you child plays sports.
- Ensure immunizations are up to date.
- Discuss school year routines two to three weeks before school starts to ease children in. It will make their life easier -- and yours.
- Clean out the closet and try on clothes to see if they still fit or need mending.
- Inventory clothing and make a list, so you know what to shop for as soon as you receive the back-to-school fliers.
- Pass clothes on to other children, or donate or consign.
- Bump up bedtime 10 to 15 minutes.
- Start getting up closer to the school-day time a couple of weeks before classes begin.
- Figure out the bus schedule. (And have mimosas and muffins with your neighbors on the first day, once the kids are on the bus!)

Homework station

Whether your children do homework at the kitchen table or at a desk in their bedroom, ensure that they have a dedicated location as well as the following:

- Good lighting.
- Comfortable chair.
- Supplies that are accessible, organized and in a dedicated place.
- A homework station that is fun and cheery, with colors they like.

School supplies and clothing

- Wait for the suggested supply list from school before shopping, and then shop when they are on sale.
- Let kids help pick out their own supplies and involve them with labeling.
- For older children, set a clothing budget and let them decide how to spend it.

Information management

- There will be lots of paperwork, and you will need a place to keep it all. Establish in/out boxes for papers that need signatures. Keep these in a central location for easy access.
- Keep copies of immunization records and birth certificates handy for each child.
- Create a binder that contains the following: emergency contact information, teacher, doctor and dentist information, bus schedules, immunization records.

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