

Back to School

A Top Ten List for Promoting Health, Happiness and Success

While we cling to the last peaceful days of summer, most parents are feeling the winds of change on the horizon. I'm referring to the anticipation of children going off to school, some for the first time, others returning after a long seasonal break. Thinking ahead about how to ease the transition into the autumn routines can help prepare children to hit the ground smiling. Here are a few suggestions:

1. (Re-) establish bedtime routines and hours before school starts. Young children need a full 9-10 hours' sleep in order to bring their best energy for attention, learning and social behavior to school each day.
2. Expect your child to behave and/or feel different after school for the first days or weeks of the term. Kids work hard to adapt to the social and learning demands in programs away from home. They work even harder the first few weeks until people, places and schedules grow to feel predictable. It's wise to allow children a period of time right after school to let down, relax and unwind before asking them to do anything constructive or structured.
3. Watch for signs from your child's behavior that may indicate they are feeling more than expected distress in making the transition to school. Unusual and persistent irritability and changes in appetite, energy or mood might suggest that your child is worn out or overwhelmed and miserably unhappy. If so, ask your child and his or her teacher. Once you identify the source, you will be able to figure out ways to improve the situation for your child.
4. Walk or ride to the school building and get to know the place and its neighborhood. This helps the child feel familiar by the time school starts.
5. Pretend play the classroom with your child. Take turns being the teacher and the child. Talk about who else will be in the class, play cooperative games and role-play at story time.
6. Tell your child stories about your first weeks of school – the excitement and the nervousness you felt. Who helped you? What was great?
7. Talk about all the terrific things to look forward to in school and how this means that your child is getting so big! Write, together, an imaginary note to the teacher, telling about yourself, what you like to do, etc.
8. Ask your child if he or she wants to bring a treasured object along to school – perhaps a stuffed animal, a charm, a bracelet, special clothing, etc. Plan together what your child will wear the first few days.
9. Check to be sure your child's immunizations are up to date and he or she has had a yearly examination by your child's doctor. Starting off with a clean bill of health or a clear approach to

managing chronic health challenges goes far toward helping your child start school with all engines firing. Most importantly, your child should have a regular physician and a secure health insurance policy. Through the Florida KidCare program, the Florida Department of Health offers free or low cost health insurance to children under age 19 who do not have private insurance. For information and application, contact the KidCare office by toll-free phone at 1-888-540-5437 or visit their website at www.floridakidcare.org.

10. Parents – get yourselves ready – physically and emotionally! Your child will need your enthusiasm and peaceful comforting during this period of change, so make sure you have the support you need and have made arrangements that will help you be as available as you want to be.