



Lepage Associates
Solution-Based Psychological Services

Get an A+ in “Back to School” Preparation

By: Lepage Associates’ Staff Psychologist

The summer is just about over. No more going to bed late, sleeping in every morning, or playing outside until dark. Now the routine has to change. These new experiences can bring on stress or cause children to resist necessary adjustments. Parents also often find the transition to a new school year stressful as they have more responsibilities, less time, and may be struggling with things in their own lives. Smooth transitions can be accomplished if the adults who care for children try to view the situation from the child's perspective. Here are some tips on what you can do to make going back to school a pleasurable experience.

Prepare in advance

- Young children always feel more comfortable if they know what to expect. Before the new school year begins, family members can explain to children how their daily routines will change. Describe what the morning routines will be in age-appropriate terms. Some children may enjoy creating a pictorial chart to include each step of the morning schedule.
- Try getting up earlier a week before the new school year begins and explain why you're doing it. This may prevent your child from being confused, groggy, cranky, or refusing to get out of bed on the first day of school.
- Discuss how the school or child care environment will be different from the previous year. Many schools and child care professionals invite families to visit the classroom and new teacher before the school year begins. If possible, take advantage of these opportunities to allow the child to meet the teacher or caregiver, find his classroom, the bathroom, and the playground.
- Try to be clear about the things that are changing by answering any questions children have such as: *When will we eat? Where is the bathroom? How will I get home? Will I see my old friends again?*
- Involve children in preparing for school. For example, they can lay out their clothes, pack a back pack, or select a favorite toy or photo to take with them to the program. Letting them bring familiar objects from home is important, too.
- Arrange play-dates with friends from school to re-establish connections that may have been dropped for the summer, or to create new ones.

Read to your child

- Reading books with children is a great way to introduce any experience. They can see how other children beginning school or a new program have the same feelings of uncertainty and how they overcome them. Here are some book suggestions for younger children to help ease the transition:
- Berenstain, Stan and Jan. *The Berenstain Bears Go to School*. Random House, 1978
- Bridwell, Norman. *Clifford's First School Day*. Scholastic, 1999
- Haywood, Carolyn. *Back to School with Betsy*. Odyssey Classics, reissue edition, 2004
- Jackson, Ellen. *It's Back to School We Go!*. Millbrook Press, 2003
- Parish, Herman. *Amelia Bedelia Goes Back to School*. Harper Festival, 2004
- Rey, Margret. *Curious George Goes to School*. Houghton Mifflin, 1989

For the middle school child anxious about making the transition to high school, here is a book to help with easing the anxiety:

- Spethman, Martin J. and Klein, Chuck. *High School Bound: The Ultimate Guide for High School Success and Survival*. Westgate Publishing & Entertainment, 1997

Talk about feelings

- Encourage children to describe how they feel about the new year; and try to ease any fears they may have.
- If your child is anxious about starting the next grade, reassure her that other children have these feelings too.
- Put a positive spin on going back to school. Talk about the fun things your child will be learning, the old friends he'll see and the new friends he'll make.
- Parents may also feel sad or fearful about their children going off to kindergarten or back to school after a summer together. Even if you are feeling this way on the inside, exude confidence and good feelings when saying good-bye.
- Expect an occasional meltdown. Beginning something new can be stressful and adjustment takes a lot of concentration and effort. Child care professionals, teachers, and families should expect--and be prepared to handle--a few tears and other emotional displays from young children.

Be there

- If possible, arrive at the new school or program early on the first few days to help the child settle in. The teacher or caregiver may also be available to talk one-on-one with your child before the day's learning begins.

- It is also important to arrange for predictable pick-up schedules. Children need to feel confident from the beginning that they can count on a loved one to come back and to come when they said they would. Use the commute to ease the transition between school and home.
- How adults handle transitional situations can set the stage for how well a child adjusts to other challenges in life. Those who love and care for children can help them adapt by making preparations in advance, clearly explaining the changes about to take place, and listening if doubts or fears develop.

Let teachers and guidance counselors know what's going on.

- If your child has recently undergone a stressful change such as divorcing/separating parents, share this information with his/her teacher and school counselor. You don't have to go into great detail, but a simple statement like, "Johnny's father and I separated over the summer, and he's having a difficult time with the transition" can alert the teacher and counselor to the situation. You may want to tell the guidance counselor specific concerns you have, i.e., "Johnny has started to become much more fearful in new situations and has trouble leaving me" so that he or she can help your child during the day if a problem arises.
- The school is in an excellent position to offer supportive services to children of divorce. Children spend much time in school, where the continuity and routine can offer a safe environment for interventions. Counselors, teachers, and other school personnel are available on a daily basis and can provide help during the school day.

Checklist for the first day of school:

- Is your child registered? When is the first day of school? What time does school start?
- What time is lunch? Can your child buy it at school, and how much will it cost? Will he or she need a snack?
- Have you filled out all the health forms or emergency contact forms that have been sent home?
- Have any new health problems developed in your child over the summer that will affect his school day? Does the school nurse know about this condition, or is an appointment set up to discuss it?
- Does your child know where she is going after school (e.g., home, babysitter)? Does she know how he will get there? If you will not be there when she arrives, does she know who will be responsible for her, what the rules are, and how to get help in an emergency?

The following websites were helpful in writing this article and are good resources for additional information.

- <http://www.kidsource.com/kidsource/pages/Education.html>
- <http://www.greatschools.net>
- <http://www.aap.org/advocacy/archives/augschool.htm> (American Academy of Pediatrics)