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Back to School: Helping Kids Adjust

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Summary: While some children adapt easily to the start of a new school year, other kids might have a harder time adjusting. As a parent, it's important to remember that every child is different. The good news, is that there are many strategies that can be done to help a child return back to school.

Introduction

Are you a parent or guardian? Does your child find it challenging when summer is over and they have to go back to school? If so, here are some tips that may help your kids (and you) make an easier transition back to school.

While some children adapt easily to the start of a new school year, other kids might have a harder time adjusting. It's important to remember that every child is different. Some children will respond well to the strategies outlined in this pamphlet, while others might need more intensive support from their primary care provider.

Tips for parents

In May / June before school ends

- If your child has an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), touch base about the IEP for the next school year starting in September.

During the summer

- Schedule play dates during the summer with other kids in your child's class. This will help them child feel more connected to their peers by the time school starts.
- Continue educational related routines like going to the library, reading time, or playing educational games.
- Plan structured activities like chores and day-to-day responsibilities so that summer isn't entirely focused on recreation.

A few weeks before school starts

- Start your school routine early. For many families, routines become more lax during the summer, with later bedtimes and more screen time. Write down your plans for the school year, such as your morning routine, drop-off routine, class schedule, pick-up routine and after-school routine.
- Go over these routines with your child. Some children are very visual, and it may be helpful to create a 'visual schedule' of their routines. You should aim to start the new routines a few weeks before school starts. Other children might need more lead time.

- Post a calendar with the school start date.This will help child visualize how many days are left until school starts.
- Shift your child's bedtime forward. A week or two (or more) before school starts, start putting your kids to bed earlier. This is easier than trying to start a new bedtime routine the night before school starts.
- For more information on sleep strategies visit: http://www.cheo.on.ca/en/Sleep-Youth

Two weeks before school starts

- Is it a new school?
    - If so, then visit the new school in advance.
    - Practice the route to school.
    - Walk around the school, and check out the playground.
    - Ask for permission to enter the school when it's open. Walk down the halls, locate your child's classroom and find the bathrooms.
- Listen and validate your child's worries. If the worry is something that you can reasonably problem solve, do so. If it's a problem that can't be fixed, like a friend moving away, then your child will need to cry and grieve the loss of the friend. Then, you can schedule playdates to help your child make new friends.
- Meet with your child's new teacher ahead of time. If possible, try to introduce your child to their new teacher ahead of time, even if it's a brief meeting.
- Fill out an "about me" page about your child to introduce your child to their teacher. Include information about your child's living arrangements, favourite activities, skills, struggles and coping mechanisms.
- Show the child that the teacher is an important person in their life. If you can, take a picture of your child with the teacher, put it on your fridge at your child's eye level so they become a familiar face.
- Hold an end of the summer celebration. To celebrate the summer, you might express gratitude about the summer by saying "thank you for ___." Then welcome the start of the school year with "I'm looking forward to hearing about your first day of school."

The night before the first day of school

- Get the backpacks ready with any supplies.
- Prepare their lunch for the next day and put them in the fridge.
- Set the breakfast table.
- Go to bed early yourself! You will feel better, calmer and better able to help your child with school.

The first day of school

- Leave earlier than usual. This way, you'll have more flex time in case of unexpected traffic or other issues.
- Establish a goodbye ritual, such as giving your child a final hug, kiss, and saying goodbye.
- Comfort your child if they are sad. Some children might have problems with separation, but remember that most of the time they will feel better after a good cry.You can say "I can see you are feeling sad and it's ok to cry. I'll be thinking of you all day and I'll pick you up at _____." After a hug and kiss goodbye, ask a staff member to hold their hand while you leave.
- After you've left your child safely at school, sit down in a peaceful place, breathe a sigh of relief, and be present… Cherish these stages of childhood as before you know it, your child will be all grown up.

Is your child still struggling?

Is your child still struggling despite your best efforts? Talk to your child's teacher, primary care provider, or a mental health professional.