

50 Ways to Rock the Back-to-School Transition

By Gemma Alexander

Kids go back to school every year in the fall. So why does it seem like this annual event never gets any easier? One reason may be that so many things change all at once; from mealtimes and bedtimes to the addition of homework and new activities, all of our routines have to change when kids go back to school. We've talked with five local experts — a chef, a tutor, a professional organizer, a parent coach and a sleep coach — to get their top back-to-school tips. Whether you practice them all or focus on the areas you care about most, these tips will make your family's back-to-school transition more successful than you thought possible.

From lunches to homework, scroll through the image pages for our tips!

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“I love my kids and I want to feed them healthy meals, but I have other things to do, too,” says professional chef and food stylist Jackie Freeman. This mom of a 15-month-old daughter and two stepsons, ages 7 and 11, has worked in restaurants and catering; developed recipes for PCC Community Markets; and hosted an online cooking show for ParentMap called “Healthy Kids Cook.” She is presently working on developing recipes for a new cookbook, due out in the fall of 2020. Here are Freeman’s top 10 tips for feeding kids healthy food they’ll actually eat three times a day (plus snacks) while leaving room in your schedule for the other things you have to do.

1. Plan ahead

It takes more time up front, but Freeman plans her family’s meals for the entire week in advance. The hour she spends on Sunday nights making a meal plan and grocery list saves her from making multiple trips to the store during the week and eliminates the stress of figuring out what to make at the last minute. She keeps it real by planning for restaurant takeout or rotisserie meals from the deli once or twice a week on the days she knows will be busiest.

2. Shop smart

Freeman says, “Always shop with a list.” She organizes her shopping list by grocery store section — meats, produce, dairy, etc. Then when she shops, she only makes one pass through the store and has everything she needs for the whole week, with no backtracking for forgotten or overlooked items.

3. Stock up

“I keep pantry staples on hand at all times — tomato sauce, chicken stock, pasta,” she says. That way, she’s always prepared when things don’t go to plan. Another fail-safe: making double batches of planned meals and freezing the extra portion. Whether you keep those extra meals frozen for emergencies or plan to eat them next week, “cook once, eat twice” is just good math.

4. Prep ahead

When she has time on the weekends, Freeman will chop a week’s worth of onions (she knows how much she needs because of the meal plan) and fill the rice cooker. She also makes school lunches the night before, at the same time she’s making dinner. Her kids don’t like leftovers for lunch, but she can prep extra fruits and vegetables for the lunch boxes while she’s preparing a dinner sauce or salad, and make sandwiches while dinner is in the oven. That way, she only has to clean up the kitchen once.

5. Use bento boxes

Bento boxes with four or five compartments are perfect for building lunches, because they invite variety and help control portion sizes. “The biggest compartment should just hold half a sandwich,” says Freeman. If you put anything bigger in a lunch box, kids probably won’t eat it. Put a different food group in each of the other compartments and you’ve got a balanced meal.

6. Make food bite-size and leave it unwrapped

It isn’t a time-saver, but it is a sanity-saver if throwing away your kids’ uneaten lunches at the end of the day is driving you crazy. Make sure everything is bite-size and unwrapped. Cut sandwiches into quarters, peel fruit, even open the string cheese wrapper. Kids are in a hurry to get to recess, and the faster they can eat, the more likely they are to do it.

7. Find a formula that works for breakfast

Freeman says, “Save the smoothies and waffles for weekends. We do the same thing for breakfast every day.” Her kids know the formula: They have to eat a protein, a carb and a fruit. She keeps two or three easy choices in each category on hand and lets her kids pick from among the options.

8. Maintain a snack stash

Keep a supply of healthy snacks hidden in the car for emergencies. Also, store the snacks at home in one designated space. Freeman has a “snack cupboard” in the kitchen where she keeps all the permitted snacks in one place. Her kids can help themselves at snack time, and they know that anything they find elsewhere in the kitchen is off-limits.

9. Talk about food

If your kids aren’t eating their lunch, ask them why. You might learn about their day (“I didn’t have time because my friends were playing”) or you might learn something you can use to make lunch better. Maybe your kid likes strawberries but not blueberries, or prefers sandwiches without mustard. Picky eating can be its own problem, but as long as your kids’ food requests conform to the protein/carb/fruit rule, try to accommodate their preferences. “It’s very satisfying when they come home with an empty lunch box,” says Freeman.

10. Foster food independence

If you keep a handful of preapproved items in each of the protein/carb/fruit categories available, you can let kids pick among the options. “It gives them independence and eliminates fighting,” she says. If that means sliced turkey and Goldfish crackers at breakfast, so be it — as long as they also eat a fruit. It won’t take long before you can remove yourself from the breakfast and snack equations entirely.

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Paul Schurr has four kids — one each in elementary, middle, high school and college — so he's had a fair bit of practice getting kids to do homework. For the past seven years, he has also been co-owner, with his wife, Mona, of [Firefly Tutoring](#), where they help kids from kindergarten through high school with science, math, reading and test prep. Here are Schurr's top 10 tips for making homework helpful, instead of hellish.

1. Don't wait for the back-to-school crush

You don't have to turn summer into an extra quarter of school, but to avoid the summer slide, don't abandon learning altogether. "What I like about summer tutoring is that it's less frantic," says Schurr. Without homework deadlines, learning can find its own steady pace and follow kids' interests.

2. Don't overschedule

If the only time left for homework is the last 15 minutes before bed, everyone will be in too big of a rush to just get it done. Squeezing homework into the leftover cracks between scheduled activities leaves kids too tired to focus and parents too stressed to be helpful.

3. Make sure homework is useful

There's a lot of discussion about how long kids should spend on their homework, and controversy over whether homework is even appropriate for lower grades. Schurr isn't sure those are the right questions. "Homework shouldn't be figuring out the hard stuff — it's practice," he says. "Homework exercises should be focused on practicing what they know to develop fluency. For some topics, especially math, even 10 minutes of practice makes a world of difference."

4. Know your kid

Schurr prefers a schedule of coming home, eating a snack and then doing homework before having free time. "But kids are different. Know if yours needs dinner first or gets too sleepy if they wait that late," he says. The important thing is not when they do homework, but that they have a fixed time and place for doing it. "Draw a line around the time and place where homework happens," says Schurr. It helps with time management skills and it's psychologically easier to not have homework hanging over their head for the rest of the day.

5. Let kids do their own work

Some kids want you right there with them on every problem, and it's tempting to

check their work and fix mistakes. But it's more useful for teachers to see kids' mistakes, so they know what they aren't getting. It's better for kids, too. "Unless they are really lost, it's good for kids to struggle a bit and earn the accomplishment," explains Schurr. Freeing up your own time is a fringe benefit.

6. Do your own work

Kids should do their own work, but you also want to keep an eye on their progress. Not to mention the screams of injustice if you plopping them at the kitchen table with a stack of worksheets while you plop on the couch to watch "Chopped." Most of us have work that we usually put off until the kids are in bed, whether it's spillover from our paying jobs, making meal plans or paying bills. Sit down next to your kids when they are doing homework and work on your own tasks. That way, you're modeling the behavior you want from them and making a dent in your own to-do list. And you're still close enough to see when they are struggling and answer questions when they need help.

7. Answer questions with questions

It's good to let kids work, but "it's not productive if kids are upset and the experience is negative," says Schurr. When kids are really stuck, it's right to help out. But instead of rescuing them with an answer, try asking leading questions that will help them reach the correct answer themselves. "I try to help kids understand why what they are learning is interesting. It's not just about getting to the answer."

8. Know when to back off

We've all seen that deer-in-the-headlights look. The near-tears face that says a kid's body is in the chair, but their mind has left the building. That's when it's time to back off. "Stop talking about that thing," says Schurr. Don't try to work through their anxiety and your frustration. Take a break, eat a snack, talk about something else for a few minutes. "Try to remember when you were young and didn't understand things that are obvious now." When you go back to the homework, start on solid ground and build from what they already understand and work up to the problem.

9. Talk to the teacher

Bad homework days are inevitable, and there's no need to get worked up about a single failed assignment. But if not understanding the homework is becoming a pattern, talk to your child's teacher and make a plan to help get him back on track. Especially at the elementary level, teachers know their students really well and want to work with parents to make sure kids excel. For older kids, it may be a more appropriate first step to encourage them to talk with their teachers themselves.

10. Get help

"You have a limited amount of time with your kids every day. Sometimes it's better to do something together and let someone else do the homework help," says Schurr. Tag-team with another parent, or hire a tutor if necessary. But if tutoring is not accessible, get creative. Is a grandparent good at math (or just very patient)? Many schools have free before- and after-school tutoring programs, as do public library branches. "The most important thing is for kids to have a positive relationship with

learning,” says Schurr.

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Julianna Poplin is a professional declutterer who helps her clients tame their stuff in order to live more intentionally — and frugally. She blogs at [The Simplicity Habit](#), and has two daughters, ages 8 and 6. When it comes to back-to-school shopping, Poplin says, “The biggest thing is [getting overwhelmed], which comes from procrastinating. There’s a tendency when we’re stressed to overbuy.” Here are Poplin’s top tips for buying just enough of the right stuff.

1. Start early

When you shop at the last minute, the selection is bad, you’re pressed for time, and it’s easy to get stressed out. Instead, break back-to-school shopping into manageable bits and spread it out over the summer.

2. Make a list

Never shop without a list. Lists help you avoid impulse and duplicate purchases, and they prevent you from buying the wrong-size binder or a lunch box with the wrong superhero on it.

3. Shop at home

Backpacks and lunch boxes don’t have to be replaced every year if they are still in good condition. If your kids’ clothes still fit, hold off on buying new ones. And if you have unopened boxes of crayons and markers in your house, add them to the school supplies instead of buying more.

4. Buy ahead

Don’t buy school clothes that fit perfectly in September or else your kid might need another new wardrobe by Christmas. Instead, get the next size up so they can wear things for the whole school year.

5. Shop alone

Shopping together for school clothes is an annual tradition, but the truth is, hardly anyone enjoys it. Especially when your kids are little, spending hours in the dressing room is torture for moms and kids alike. You probably already know their size and what they like anyway, so shop without the kids. You won’t have to wrestle them in and out of dressing rooms or listen to them beg for things that you don’t want to buy.

6. Talk about marketing

Sometimes you have to bring the kids along; maybe they are picky about shoes, or they've just had a growth spurt and you're not sure about their new size. When you go together, talk about the difference between wants and needs. Explain how advertising and store displays manipulate people into purchasing things they don't need. Not only will it cut down on the "gimmies," it teaches kids important lessons for when they are old enough to shop on their own.

7. Compromise

"Don't fight over clothes. As long as it's appropriate, let kids wear what they like," suggests Poplin. "But don't spend money on silly trends either." Explain to your kids why your family makes the choices it does and hold firm on not buying trendy accessories or items emblazoned with brand-name logos. At the same time, don't waste money on frilly dresses if your daughter prefers to wear sweats.

8. Give choices

Even if you shop from a list and don't buy a lot of extras, "Give kids choices, rather than entering negotiations," advises Poplin. Let kids know ahead of time that they can buy three fancy pencils, or that they get to choose their lunch box. That way, it's easier to avoid negotiating over every little thing that catches their eye.

9. Be frugal — to a point

Shopping the [Just Between Friends](#) sales, consignment stores and clearance sales can save you a lot of money and help you get higher-quality goods for lower prices. But don't let the price tag be your only guide. Cheap backpacks need to be replaced more often, and cheap pencils splinter every time you try to sharpen them. Be willing to spend a little more where it counts.

10. Consider your storage space

"Balance the need to be frugal with the desire for simplicity," says Poplin. "Don't toss something if you're just going to have to rebuy it next year." If you have enough space, hang on to those outgrown soccer cleats for a younger sibling. Buy extra school supplies on clearance and save them for next year. But no matter how big your garage is, "If you know they won't use it again, pass it on or donate it," says Poplin.

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Sarina Behar Natkin, LICSW, is a parent coach with two kids of her own. Trained as a therapist, she works with parents to identify the skills they want to teach their children and to determine whether what they do actually supports their goals. “So much is out of kids’ control in their lives,” she says. “Routines let them predict what will happen and gain a sense of control.” Here are Natkin’s top tips for creating back-to-school routines that will help kids (and their parents) thrive.

1. Set yourselves up for success

“One of our best strategies as parents is prevention. Setting things up is easier than fixing a problem,” says Natkin. So, don’t wait until kids are behind in school or sleep-deprived from late nights to start working on establishing healthy routines. Before school starts, plan the routines you will follow.

2. Work together

Even toddlers can be involved in setting up their own routines, and having a say in the process improves compliance. Furthermore, by helping them work through the steps of figuring out what needs to be done, you’re preparing them to manage their own time as they get older.

3. Make it a game

Whether you’re planning a bedtime routine or a routine for getting out the door in the morning, treat it like a puzzle. Have kids make a list of everything that needs to happen, then ask leading questions to help them put the steps in an order that works.

4. Look at the big picture

Don’t come up with a single, idealized routine. Instead, look at the whole week and recognize that every day is a little different. If your kid has a late soccer practice on Thursday, plan for a later, shorter bedtime. If Tuesday is the only day with no after-school activities, let kids know that’s the day to make a dent on homework for the week.

5. Give yourself wiggle room

Speaking of idealized routines, nothing in real life goes exactly to plan. Give yourself wiggle room in your routines, especially at the beginning, so lost minutes here and there don’t cascade into chaos. Building 10 extra minutes into the morning routine can make the difference between a mad dash to beat the late bell and a calm start to the day.

6. Give your routine time to work

“Starting a new school year is like starting a new job. You’ve got a new desk, a new schedule, you’re surrounded by a different group of people. It’s exhausting,” says Natkin. Don’t panic if everything doesn’t run like clockwork right away. Give yourself and your kids a little bit of time to adjust.

7. Think about how you communicate

“It’s easy for kids to ignore orders barked from another room,” says Natkin. When you stay calm, make eye contact and ask questions instead of issuing commands, routines go more smoothly. (It’s easier to do those things if you’ve followed the tip to build in an extra 10 minutes.) “But don’t talk nonstop — nagging causes stress and resistance.”

8. Be consistent and flexible

Have faith in the process. If you stick with the routine, kids will start to get it after a few repetitions. Even well-established routines will inevitably slide when holidays, houseguests or a round of colds interfere. When that happens, adjust as necessary in the moment. But as soon as the issue is resolved, recommit to the routine and start again. Involve kids by asking, “Can you remind me how we decided to do this?”

9. Be willing to change

Routines don’t work unless they are, well, routine. If the routine slides more often than it sticks, it might be time to try something different. “If it’s not working consistently, stop and see why,” suggests Natkin. Maybe you need to break things into smaller steps or build in more time. Reflect on what’s working and what isn’t working, but don’t endlessly rehash or start judging. Just figure out a new plan.

10. Don’t engage in power struggles

“Make clear boundaries in a kind way and stick to them,” says Natkin. “Negative attention feeds the beast.” Once kids learn that you mean what you say, they’ll pick up the new routine pretty quickly. Saying, “I’ll be waiting on the porch while you get your shoes on” might result in your being late once or twice (it goes back to building in wiggle room). But if you say, “Fine, I’ll put your shoes on this time,” then putting your kid’s shoes on for them will become part of the morning routine.

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Sleep coach Malia Jacobson is also a health and parenting journalist who has written two books on kids and sleep. With three kids of her own — ages 6, 9 and 12 — she has some sound advice for getting back to a healthy school-year sleep schedule without turning bedtime into a battle.

1. Don't get attached to the numbers

Pediatrician guidelines for how much sleep kids need at each age are just that — guidelines. “Each child has an amount of sleep that they need, and it can vary from published recommendations,” says Jacobson. Observe your kids and notice how much they sleep when they're not restricted by schedules. The goal is happy, energetic and focused kids, not a fixed number of hours of sleep.

2. Know the difference between tired and sleepy

When kids go to bed at the right time, they fall asleep quickly and easily. Finding that magic window can be tricky, though, because many kids become wired when they are too tired and don't act sleepy at all. “When kids are getting up repeatedly, it means they are not ready for sleep,” says Jacobson. Kids who fall asleep but wake up often or sleep restlessly are probably overtired.

3. Start at the beginning

Most people think about bedtime when they think about getting enough sleep. But to get your kids on a healthy sleep schedule, start at the beginning of the day. Waking up and eating breakfast sets our circadian rhythm, and no one can go to sleep when they aren't tired yet. So, if your kids have gotten into the habit of sleeping in over the summer, start waking them closer to the time they need to get up for school, and earlier bedtimes will follow naturally.

4. Get an alarm clock

Give your kids their own alarm clock and let them set it themselves. It gives them a sense of independence and eliminates the first potential power struggle of the day. “Using an alarm clock is easier than being the bad guy,” says Jacobson. Alexa, Amazon's smart speaker, is a great alarm clock because it has easy controls, doesn't emit a bright light and has no visible clockface to create stress about being awake when you ought to be asleep.

5. Take baby steps

If summer schedules have drifted far from school-year requirements, shifting back on

the first day of school is like forcing jet lag — hardly the way you want kids to feel for the first week of school. Instead, start as far ahead of time as you need to limit the time-shift to no more than 30 minutes each day.

6. Change the routine together

Remember that your kids are older than they were last school year, so the old routine probably needs some adjusting. Whether it's giving them time to read on their own or letting them brush their teeth unsupervised, let their promotion to a new grade level be reflected in bedtime. "Involve your child in developing the routine," says Jacobson. "Research shows increased compliance if kids have input."

7. Practice

Don't wait until the night before school starts, when excitement and anxiety levels are high, to try the new routine. There are plenty of other new things to deal with during the first week of school. Going to bed on time should already be routine by the time school is set to start.

8. Turn out the lights

Everyone knows you have to turn out the lights to go to sleep. But that goes for more than just the light switch on the wall. The light from TV and cell phone screens can disrupt melatonin production. Instead of watching a TV show to wind down before bed, read a book together. Also, make sure older kids take care of those "goodnight streaks" on Snapchat at least an hour before they actually go to bed if you want them to fall sleep easily.

9. Cool your head

Did you know that you can buy scalp-cooling devices as a treatment for insomnia? Cooling the body, especially the scalp, has been shown to help people sleep. You don't have to buy a special gadget, though. An evening bath or shower, even if kids are already clean, is an effective soporific.

10. Rest easy

For most families, the hours between 6 and 9 p.m. are bedtime crunch time. If you have a lot of work to do after that, you can't get enough sleep before the whole house needs to be up in the morning. "Try to avoid putting all the work on yourself after the kids go to bed, so you can sleep, too," suggests Jacobson. Enlist the rest of the family to help with chores so that you can model healthy behavior — and reap the benefits of making sleep a top priority.