

Going to School

Home »

Back-to-School Time: Transition Your Family from Summer to School

By Bethany Hardy

Recently, during one of our unbearably hot days, my preschool-aged son and I watched movies all afternoon while snuggling in bed. We may have set a couch potato record, but I don't feel guilty. We had nothing important to do and nowhere that we had to be. It was the quintessential lazy summer day, and we had a blast.

With fall just around the corner, I've got mixed emotions about school starting again. Although it will be nice to no longer have to plan 12-hour stretches of entertainment ("Sure, we can play 'ghost hunters in the closet' for the seventeenth time!"), this anxiety-prone, [commit-aholic mom](#) is dreading the return of schedules and stress.

If only we could bottle those tender parental feelings summer brings—the joy of teaching your child how to dive into the pool, the pleasure of devouring ice cream cones together on the porch, or the peacefulness of taking post bedtime walks through the neighborhood—and experience them all year long. Sadly, those relaxing moments of camaraderie seem to grow scarce once the school bus reappears.

This year, I've vowed, will be different. Instead of crouching in our kiddie pool in a state of paralysis, I'm taking steps now to make my family's transition to the school year as smooth as a piña colada. I encourage you to join me.



- 1. Anticipate and address your child's anxiety.** Going back to school is stressful for kids of all ages, so head off the stress before school even starts, says Renee Clausell, a child psychologist in Long Island, New York. Talk with your children about new experiences and traditions, from using the potty at preschool to learning how to use a locker "in a playful and creative, role-playing way," Clauselle says.
- 2. Manage your own anxiety.** Maintain a positive attitude about summer ending, advises Edward Christopherson, a Kansas City-based child psychologist. "If you are nervous about school starting, then your child is certainly going to be nervous about school starting," he says. It also helps to plan fun, transitional activities to prepare your kids, says Tina Feigal, an author and parenting coach in Roseville, Minn. "Plan a fun weekend for Labor Day, and include the kids in the plan," she suggests. "If school has already started, it's a nice buffer vacation. If it hasn't, Labor Day is a great time to say good-bye to summer and hello to all the good things coming up in the new school year."
- 3. Ease back into scheduled days.** When your kids are used to running around outside until dark each night, shifting to the early morning school bus rush can be a real shock to the system. To ease the transition, about a week before the first day of school, start their bedtime routine about 10 minutes earlier each night and wake them up 10 minutes earlier each morning, every day, until they're back on track. And Mom and Dad: don't forget to readjust your bedtime schedules too!
- 4. Stay connected to nature.** Going back to class doesn't mean your kids have to say farewell to outdoor fun. Make a habit of getting outside together after the school day ends, for as long as the warm weather lasts. When the air turns cold, hold a "camp-in" weekend evening, suggests Sarene Marshall, director of The Nature Conservancy's global climate change team: "Set up floor pillows or sleeping bags, turn off all the electronics, and play good, old-fashioned board games." You can also encourage your kids to create a lasting record of the family's outdoor activities by creating a "summer adventures journal" together, she notes.
- 5. Get back to healthy eating.** If your family is like mine, your household inventory of potato chips and cookies skyrockets during the summer. The arrival of fall is a perfect time to teach your kids that family-focused healthy eating can be fun too. "While [kids] may be used to having ice cream every night in the summer, start swapping [those] out some nights for fruit Popsicles, frozen yogurt, or baked fruit sprinkled with cinnamon and brown sugar," says Rania Batanyeh, a San Francisco-based nutritionist and wellness coach. "And be prepared with healthy snacks and meals when things get hectic, such as in the morning before school, when kids come home from school, and before dinner."
- 6. Seek out one-on-one time with your child every day.** Yes, this one is daunting, especially when your days consist of carting Kid A to one activity and picking up Kid B from another. But challenge yourself to set aside just 15 minutes per day, per child, to enjoy a quiet activity together. Whether it involves reading a few extra books to your toddler, taking turns making up a story with your preschooler, or gazing at the stars with your oldest after the others have been put to bed, your children will savor your undivided attention. And both of you will benefit from putting yet another hectic day on hold.