

Back to School!

By Sonja Bogumill

I know none of us wants to think of it, but summer's coming to an end. Pretty soon we will send our children back to school. The peace and quiet sounds nice, but the cost is high: getting everybody out the door in the morning, homework wars and harried schedules.

Early in my training I was working with a fifth grade girl and her family. The girl's ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) had the family members hard pressed to find anything they enjoyed doing together. When they returned to my office after the winter break, I asked them how it had been to spend so much time together. I was expecting stories of arguments, yelling and crying, but instead all three agreed, "It was great!" I asked what had happened. "There was no getting out the door in the morning."

It was then I realized that there are many demands school puts on us that are not conducive to a harmonious family life. Getting up early, getting moving in the morning, leaving Mom and Dad for the day, and, the biggie for some families, homework.

If your children have already spent some time in school, then you know which, if any, of these is problematic for you. If you have a child entering kindergarten, I may be scaring you. But fear not, I will arm you with some tools that will help make the transition back to school smoother. Homework is for a future column.

Getting Up Early

You know your child best. Is she a morning person or a night owl? Does he wake up chipper and alert, or does he need 30 minutes to even think about sitting up? Does she need 8 or 10 hours of sleep to function properly?

Summer is a time that parents often let bedtime routines go out the window. With the sun out until 8:30, it can be hard to call children in from playing in time to get them ready for their normal bedtime. If your bedtime routine now consists of letting your children fall into bed at the end of a long day of playing, you need to slowly get back on track so that, when you ask them to come in at 7:00 the night before school starts, you do not shock their systems.

Two weeks before school starts is a good time to introduce a little structure into bedtime, whether it is taking time to read a book, coming in earlier or setting out clothes for tomorrow. Begin with one structure change, and let it stay at that for a few days. Once your child is used to that one, add another, and so on.

In thinking about what bedtime your child will have in September, calculate the hours of sleep needed and time needed in the morning. Then give yourself 30 minutes for a bedtime routine as well. For example: We need to leave for school at 7:45, my child needs 10 hours of sleep, and, while he wakes up chipper, he needs some time to play in the morning. So we need to get up at 6:30. This means he needs to be asleep by 8:30, and we need to start getting ready for bed no later than 8:00.

Getting Out the Door

This is more of an organizational issue than a parenting one. How much help do your children need getting ready in the morning? How ready for the day do you need to be when you take them to school? Simply packing lunches the night before and having children choose their clothes for the next day can save a lot of trouble in the morning.

Children often need some attention from you in the morning, and if you are putting all your attention into getting ready, you will have parenting issues. I have had children tell me that they stay in bed late on purpose, so their parents will come in to wake them up! Also, try to limit television in the morning. At least make sure they are *completely* ready to leave before you let them turn it on.

Separation Anxiety

If you have a little one starting or going back to school, you may be dreading trying to leave him at the door. Your child may prefer to be with you and may not be so interested in staying all day at a strange new place.

A little preparation can help with the transition. Take your child to the school playground during the summer. Talk about how fun it will be to play there with friends when school starts. Get to school early the first day, so that you have time to play before going in. Practice what it will be like to say “goodbye” at the door. Walk through what your child will do after you go. Remember to include recess in your description of the day!

Final Thoughts

Remember that children love to play. Any time that you can take a deep breath and remember to be playful you will find yourself enjoying your child more. It can be hard to get in touch with your playful side when you have too much to do in too little time, but children appreciate silliness, of any kind. You will find that when you are in a power struggle with your child, a little silliness can often get you what you want!