

Managing Back to School Stress

Back to school time can be overwhelming for many families. The transition from August to September can test a family's coping skills. Some of the issues that children face when they are starting a new school year include:

- Meeting new teachers and adapting to their expectations
- Adapting to a new classroom or school
- Adjusting to moving from classroom to classroom and having multiple teachers (for children who are moving from primary to secondary grades)

Parents have adjustments to make too. Transitioning back from a summer to a school schedule can have a big impact on work and child care arrangements. In addition, during the school year, there is less opportunity for relaxed “hanging out” with kids because of the demands of homework and school activities.

When people are undergoing major schedule changes, they are more likely to fall into bad habits, such as eating fast food or skipping exercise. While there's nothing wrong with the occasional drive thru dinner or missed workout on a particularly busy day, it's important to try to establish regular schedules that will help you manage stress and keep both yourself and your children healthy.

At the start of the school year, it may be helpful to ask yourself some questions to help you plan for the pitfalls of back to school stress. These include:

- **Define stress.** What does stress feel like to you? Does your stress increase during periods of change? Keep in mind that everyone experiences stress differently.



- **Identify your family's stressors.** What situations seem to lead to stressful feelings? For parents: are these stresses related to children getting older, balancing family responsibilities, or keeping everyone organized? What things or events — school-related or otherwise — seem to cause your children stress?
- **Recognize how your family deals with stress.** Do your children act up or become anxious in response to changes in their lives? Careful observation of family members will help you notice behavior patterns that they may fall into when under stress.

Helping Children Cope with Back to School Stress

Discuss your child's expectations and worries about the start of the school year prior to the first day of school. Some ways that you can help alleviate your child's feelings of apprehension include:

- If your child is going to a new school,

arrange a visit before school starts. Help your child familiarize him or herself with classroom and facility locations, locker combinations, etc.

- If your child has a teacher with an intimidating reputation, set up a time for the two of them to be introduced before classes start.
- Tell your child how you felt on your first day of school at his or her age. Emphasize the positives of the experience, such as the new friends you made and the fun you had once you got used to your new situation.
- If your child is nervous about a school subject, find out what specific information the class will cover. Locate age-appropriate materials on the subject via your local library or the Internet. Review these materials with your

child in short bursts so he or she will feel more comfortable when class begins.

- If your child has gone through a lot of physical changes over the summer (especially the more awkward adolescent changes), talk with him or her about any concerns related to his or her appearance and classmate reactions.
- Let younger children who are used to being at home with you know that you will miss them, but don't overemphasize this point. It's important that your child feel excited about starting school, not guilty or sad because mom or dad is alone more.

Additional Ways to Manage Stress

- **Make time for family.** Eat meals together, schedule a weekly family game night, or engage in weekend activities such as a bicycle ride, a visit to a museum, or a local park. It's important to spend some one-on-one time with each of your children periodically as well.
- **Practice self-care.** Assess priorities and eliminate non-essential tasks. Remember that working out, eating right, and taking periodic mental breaks will help increase your emotional stamina and ability to take care of others.

If you or one of your children experiences significant stress, you may want to contact LifeMatters. Professional counselors can help address the emotions behind your or your child's behavior and assist with managing unhealthy coping mechanisms.

LifeMatters® has professional counselors available 24 hours a day, every day of the year to discuss a variety of lifestyle concerns. Call anytime.

1-800-634-6433

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Visit LifeMatters on the Internet at:

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