

Prevention Newsletter

...for the health and well-being of you and your family.

September, 2009

After a summer of sleeping in and doing things on their time, the morning alarm and school bell can be a rude awakening announcing to students it's time to go back to school.

Whether they dread it or love it, your kids have to go back to school. This edition of the Prevention Newsletter gives helpful suggestions to make the transition from summer to school a little easier on everyone.

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Back-to-School Basics

First Day Mania

There's no escaping the fact that the first day of school can be crazy for kids, no matter what their age or what grade they are starting. New kids wander around in circles, lockers don't open, gym shorts are forgotten. Or perhaps your child is transitioning to middle or high school from grade school. Even students returning to the same school have new teachers, classmates, school work, schedules, and expectations—making back-to-school time stressful on everyone! So how can parents combat the first day chaos? Below are several helpful suggestions:

- Walk young school-goers to their classroom and stay with them until they are settled and feel comfortable. Reintroduce them to their teacher, show them their desk, locker, etc. Leave once they feel at ease.
- Arrange a visit beforehand if your child will be going to a new school. Explore all the areas of the school and get a map to help direct him or her again on the first day.
- Pack backpacks the night before so no one is scrambling around at the last minute looking for all the necessary supplies. Also, have lunch packed or lunch money ready in advance.
- Hunt down any school forms that were mailed to your child over the summer, such as immunization records, permission slips, and class schedules.
- As your child gets older, appearance and what he/she wears on the first day of school becomes very important. To combat this, pick out clothes the night before. This will help keep everyone on track and on time while getting ready in the morning.

It's that time of year again—the time when millions of kids go back to school!



Backpack Safety

Backpacks are both a popular and practical way for school-aged children and teens to carry their books and supplies. When used correctly, the backpack's weight is distributed to some of the body's strongest muscles, and it can be a good way to carry the necessities of the school day. However, if backpacks are too heavy or worn incorrectly, they can cause back, neck, and shoulder pain, as well as posture problems.

To choose the right backpack, look for the following:

- **Wide, padded shoulder straps.** Narrow straps can dig into shoulders causing pain and restricting circulation.
- **Two shoulder straps.** Backpacks with only one cannot distribute weight evenly.
- **Padded back.** This protects against sharp edges on objects inside the pack and increases comfort.
- **Waist strap.** It can distribute the weight of a heavy load more evenly.
- **Lightweight backpack.** The backpack itself should not add much weight to the load.
- **Rolling backpack.** This type of backpack may be good for students who must carry heavy loads. Just remember, rolling backpacks must be carried when having to go up stairs.

Students, to prevent injuries when using a backpack, keep the following in mind:

- Always use both shoulder straps.
- Tighten the straps so that the pack is close to your body.
- Pack light.
- Organize the backpack so all of its compartments are being used.
- Stop often at your locker and remove any unnecessary books or items.
- Bend down using both knees while the pack is on.

Parents can also help in the following ways:

- Encourage your child or teenager to tell you if he or she is in pain or discomfort because of a heavy load in the backpack.
- Talk to the school about lightening the load and/or be sure the school allows for enough time for your child to stop at his/her locker throughout the day.

Researchers found that the average weight of a child's school backpack was 18 pounds, or 14 percent, of his/her body weight. Studies have found that children carrying backpacks exceeding 10 percent of their body weight are more likely to lean forward while walking—potentially increasing their risk of back pain. So, be sure you talk with your children and make sure they are using their backpacks correctly!

Playground Safety

According to the National Program for Playground Safety, playground injuries are the leading cause of injuries to students ages 4 to 15 in the school environment.

Following is a checklist you or your child's school can print off and use for quick reference, so before your child heads out the door for the playground, you can be sure that:

- **Supervision is present.** The National Program for Playground Safety estimates that more than 40 percent of playground injuries are related to inadequate supervision. Adult presence is needed to watch for potential hazards, observe, intercede, and facilitate play when necessary.
- **All children play on age-appropriate equipment.** Preschoolers ages 2 to 5 and children ages 5 to 12 are developmentally different and need different equipment located in separate areas to keep the playground safe and fun for all.
- **Surfaces are cushioned.** The National Program for Playground Safety found that nearly 70 percent of all playground injuries are related to falls to the surface. Acceptable surfaces include hardwood fiber/mulch, pea gravel, sand, and synthetic materials such as rubber mats or tiles. Concrete, asphalt, grass, blacktop, and packed dirt or rocks are not recommended.
- **Equipment is safe.** Check to make sure the equipment is anchored safely in the ground, all equipment pieces are in good working order, S-hooks are entirely closed, bolts are not protruding, there are no exposed footings, etc.

Good Homework and Study Habits

After a long summer, your child may have trouble getting back into the swing of homework. Parents should help children establish healthy study habits as soon as school starts, rather than waiting until they notice problems or until their child's work load becomes overwhelming. The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests the following tips to help parents develop good homework and study habits in their children:

- Create an environment that is conducive to doing homework. Youngsters need a permanent work space in their rooms or in another part of the home that offers privacy.
- Set aside ample time for homework. Don't leave it until all after-school activities are over.
- Establish a household rule that the TV stays off during homework time.
- Be available to answer questions and offer assistance, but never do a child's homework for him or her.
- Have your child take a 10-minute break every hour and do something else to alleviate eye, neck, and brain fatigue.
- Set up a tutor for your child if he/she is struggling in a particular subject and you aren't able to help enough yourself. Be sure to discuss this option with your child's teacher first.

Other Helpful Suggestions

The following suggestions include important information—such as health conditions and emergency contacts—that can sometimes slip through the cracks, yet should be shared with your child's school.

- Give the school an up-to-date list of emergency contacts for before, during, and after-school hours.
- Give the school nurse and/or principal a list of medications your child is currently taking. If it's a medication the child needs to take during school, be sure it is in the original container and clearly marked (not in an envelope, for instance).
- Report any health problems your child has to the school nurse and/or principal. Allergies are a good example of a health problem the school needs to know about in advance, since there are so many allergies now to food, plants, trees, bee stings, or latex.
- Inform the school nurse and/or principal of any physical restrictions your child may possess, such as asthma, and how this may affect his/her physical activity.

Resources Available

The following Web sites are helpful resources parents can use to make the transition of going back to school easy for everyone.

- American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry: www.aacap.org
- American Academy of Pediatrics: www.aap.org
- KidsHealth: www.kidshealth.org
- National Program for Playground Safety: <http://www.playgroundsafety.org/safety/checklist.htm>
- American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons: <http://www.orthoinfo.org>
- Safe Kids USA: <http://www.usa.safekids.org>

For many children and teens the beginning of every school year can be a little bumpy. Change is exciting, but it can be scary too. However, with your understanding, patience, and a gentle nudge, your child or teen should have an exciting and rewarding school experience!