

How to Help Your Kids Prepare for the School Year

Getting ready to go back to school impacts the entire family.

For kids, a new school year means new teachers, new classrooms and new responsibilities. Sometimes it means new friends. The first days at a new school—or first days in middle school or high school—can be very intimidating.

Dad, I'm sure you realize all of this, but I hope you'll embrace your role during this time.

If your summer was pretty unstructured, like it is in many homes, your kids will benefit from being gently reminded that the routine is about to change pretty drastically. But it isn't just a reality check for them; it's also a recommitment for you. It's your chance to make a big investment of encouragement in your kids.

What I recommend is simply sitting down to talk about it—maybe at bedtime or during a meal. Talk about past school years, like: “What memory do you have from kindergarten?” “What experience at school embarrassed you the most?” “When did you feel most proud of something you accomplished?”

Make sure you dig into your memory, too, and tell them your own back-to-school stories, good and not-so-good. That will help your kids open up. Then ask about what friends they'll be reconnecting with soon or what teacher they're looking forward to having.

Through it all, Dad, listen closely. Take mental notes. You may uncover a deeper worry your child has, and you can keep that on your radar screen.

Also, the first time you bring up the school year, don't jump

right in and start setting expectations about grades and homework deadlines. Keep it positive for now.

At the next conversation, you can begin asking about goals and schedules. Then let that transition to a new promise by you to partner with them and help them stay on target.

If they start to groan about all the work that's ahead, you can change the mood by saying something like, "You know, kiddo, even if you failed every class and got kicked out of school for setting a thousand frogs loose in the cafeteria, I would still love you."

After the laughter dies down, remind them of their gifts and talents and their past success. Send them off to school with a new hope and a heartfelt blessing. Then do all you can to keep it going the entire year.

Additionally, I challenge you to give your children a larger vision for what the school year can be. As you know, life is about a lot more than academics, and the school year provides plenty of opportunities for your children to grow in other important character qualities.

What other characteristics do you hope your children develop? Leadership? Generosity? Perseverance? Empathy for those in need? Talk about that with them too. Encourage them to look for chances to grow in those areas, and keep reinforcing those qualities over the coming weeks and months.

Last thing—don't forget it's also an adjustment for your kids' mom, and maybe a welcome one. With the kids at school on weekdays, maybe start scheduling a regular lunch date for the two of you.

Dad, what back-to-school exercises or routines have worked well in your family? Please contribute to the discussion and help other dads.

Action Points for Dads on the Journey

- One of the best ways to be involved in your child's education is to volunteer at his or her school as part of our WATCH . (Dads Of Great Students) program. Start looking at days you can volunteer, or bring the program to your local school. Find out more.
- As you talk with your kids, be sure to include at least a comment or two about potential dangers and pitfalls (bullies, alcohol, drugs, etc.).
- Do you typically do back-to-school clothes shopping? Don't go overboard, but if it's in the budget, consider letting your kids get one or two new things to make those first days back a little more special.
- Update the family calendar with all the upcoming school-related events—and make sure you make them a high priority on your calendar also. Plan to attend as many as you can.
- Do you live apart from your children? Do all you can to stay updated on their assignments, projects and school activities. For example, get a copy of the book your child is reading in school and read it at the same time so you can talk about it.

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