

## Ten Ways to Help Your Child get “Back to School” Ready

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You survived the last two years of ups and downs, and now, you survived the summer. We know these last two school years have not been “normal” and we have seen the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on our children’s development, social skills, and mental health. We hope that the 2022-2023 school year is a return to predictability and we want to give you some hope and excitement about what a school year can bring. Here are ten ways that you can help your child, and your family, get ready to go back to school:

1. **Let’s get up! (Morning routine):** Work with your child to create a morning schedule—it can be a checklist, a visual schedule, or photographs that show exactly what needs to be done to be “ready” for school in the morning. Some examples: take a picture of your child fully dressed (shoes, jacket, backpack, etc.) so they can see what they are working towards or make a list of items that need to be included in their backpack.
2. **Let’s get dressed! (Dressing skills):** Help your child select a few favourite outfits that are comfortable and easy to put on. If your child likes routines, you can “rotate” through these favourite outfits, or have an outfit laid out the night before. Be mindful of sensory sensitivities: if your child will only tolerate a certain type of pants or socks, be prepared with multiples of this same preferred clothing item to make dressing easy and low stress. If your child wears a uniform, is there a “comfortable” version that would be acceptable for your child to wear (e.g. t-shirt and gym/sweatpants)? For younger children, offer dolls or dress-up clothes as an opportunity to practice fasteners such as zippers and buttons, (Halloween costumes are often a fun and motivating way to practice!)
3. **Let’s eat! (Feeding/mealtimes):** Work with your child to select some favourite lunch or snack items—be sure to include some easy “preferred” foods each day, as well as offering some food “challenges” (exposure is important, even if your child doesn’t end up eating the less-preferred food). If possible, in the weeks leading up to school, try to time your snacks/meals at home to correspond to school nutrition breaks—you may want to set a timer or “alarm” as a reminder if this is helpful. Serve lunch/snack in the same lunchbox and containers your child will be using at school, so they have a chance to practice opening zippers and containers. If your child will have access to a cafeteria or meal-plan, is it possible to review menu/food options in advance so they know what to expect?
4. **Let’s get organized! (Organization/time management skills):** Create a family calendar where everyone can visualize daily and weekly plans. For younger children, you may want to create a daily visual schedule to manage expectations about what happens before and after school. For older children and teens, spend some time figuring out what might work best for tracking homework and assignments: a physical calendar or written agenda, or an app on their smartphone, tablet or computer. Discuss expectations for how your child will communicate with

parents or the school team when they have questions or need clarification about assignments.

5. **Let's play! (Fine motor skills):** Developing fine motor skills is key to many school activities, including handwriting. There are lots of great ways to build hand strength and skills through play. Some suggestions:
  - a. Make “cookies” using play dough and cookie cutters; older children and youth can sculpt with clay or plasticene.
  - b. Make a bracelet by threading beads onto a lace, or placing cereal, such as Cheerios or Froot Loops, on a pipe cleaner. Older children or youth can create patterns or spell messages with letters or coloured beads.
  - c. Use tongs or tweezers to pick up and sort pom poms or cotton balls
  - d. Build pencil skills by colouring or completing dot-to-dots or mazes
  
6. **Let's play! (Gross motor skills):** Take your child to the park or playground at their school. Explore the space together. You can play “follow the leader” or “Simon says.” Older children can help to create a scavenger hunt. Where will your child spend their time during recess or free time? What activities do they enjoy? Can you bring a ball, hula hoop, bean bags to create a game together?
  
7. **Let's be friends! (Social skills):** Will your child know anyone at school? Is there a way to connect with other parents or children before school starts? Ideally you can reach out to another family before school and set up a time to meet—even spending a short time on the playground together will create a sense of familiarity. If it's not possible to set this up before school starts, your school team can help to facilitate a connection with one or more other students during the first few days. Does your child's school have any clubs or extra-curricular activities that might relate to your child's area(s) of interest? Can you reach out to a supportive teacher or admin staff about starting a “Minecraft club,” “coding club,” STEM, music, arts, or sports your child enjoys?
  
8. **Let's talk! (Emotional regulation):** Start talking about emotions in your home and normalize your child's worries about going back to school. For younger children, books and pictures can help them learn to identify these feelings. Older children may want to keep a journal or use art or digital media to represent their thoughts and feelings.
  
9. **Let's breathe! (Calming strategies):** Going back to school can feel stressful for your child. You can teach them strategies to help them manage this stress in the classroom. Breathing techniques like cookie breathing (i.e., have your child pretend they are taking a deep breath in while smelling freshly baked cookies, and then blowing out to cool the cookie down) can be used both at home and at school. Older children and youth may be receptive to practicing modified meditation and mindfulness strategies or using affirmations. For more ideas click here: <https://smho-smso.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/EDMH-ParentActivities-FINAL-EN.pdf>

10. **Let's go to bed! (Sleep and bedtime routines):** Practice getting into a regular bedtime routine—limit electronics at least two hours before bed and encourage calming activities such as reading or meditation. Encourage exercise and active activities during the day, as well as allowing for quieter activities (such as reading or listening to music) to rest and recharge. Try to keep bedtime and wake-up times consistent.

We hope these suggestions will be helpful in giving you somewhere to start for your “back to school” routines and skills. As summer comes to an end, don’t forget to take time to relax, connect, and have fun as a family. Plan for a balance of “rest” and “fun” as you ease into the school routine. Happy “Back to School!”

## References

School Mental Health Ontario. (2020). Parent activities. <https://smho-smso.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/EDMH-ParentActivities-FINAL-EN.pdf>

