

Strategies for Getting the School Year Off To A Good Start

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If you have kids in middle or high school, and if your family is anything like mine, you know the coming of the school year means busy season is around the corner. With kids coming and going, activities to be organized, tests to be studied for, and maybe even the college admissions process looming, it can seem as though every day is like managing the invasion of Normandy. Nothing can make this easy, but I do have a few tips to share that may make things a little less frantic.

Get All the Key Dates onto a Single Calendar

To the extent that key dates for each child during the school year are known in advance, it can be a great help to write them all down on a single calendar, along with plans that involve the whole family. It should include things like finals, performances and recitals, application deadlines, athletic meets, as well as vacations, religious holidays, and travel plans. Once everything is in one place, it's time to take some educated guesses about how much time (if any) will be needed to prepare for each event. Some people like to use colored highlighters - one for each family member - to indicate the time for prep for each date. With everything in one place, it's a lot easier to look ahead and see when several events coincide, or come close to doing so, and create the potential for a family logjam. Half the battle is just knowing what's coming, and when. At the risk of sounding old fashioned, in my experience it's still a lot easier to do this with a good old paper calendar than with computers and programs like Outlook, or with online programs like Google Calendar. At some point I'm sure paper calendars will seem hopelessly quaint, but as of 2010 I think we should give the technologists a few more years to work the kinks out.

Set the Ground Rules

When trying to bring the rule of law to freewheeling towns in the Old West, sheriffs often found that a lot could be accomplished by just posting the rules in a public place. It's no use trying to enforce the law if people don't know what it is, or can at least reasonably claim not to know. (Shootouts at high noon and fast draws in saloons weren't so successful historically, but they make for much better movies.) Households with middle and high school kids aren't so different from those towns, and so like those sheriffs, the first thing you've got to do is to post the rules, I reckon. So sit down with the varmints, figure out and agree on what time they have to get home, when the cell phone has to be turned off, when the homework has to get done, how much TV is enough, and write it down. Post that in the town square (or the fridge) so that there won't be any arguments about how many text messages you said they could send. One other consideration is exceptions. There will always be a few times when the rules will have to bend a bit, because of special circumstances, and you may be better off acknowledging than fighting it. You might decide that each kid should get two exceptions per term to the homework rule. But after that, they'll have to give up something to get another get-out-of-jail-free card.

Check on Progress Regularly

Some of the challenges during the school year call for a long, continuous effort and not just planning for and scheduling a single, one-time event. For example, studying for the SAT involves memorizing vocabulary and taking practice tests over many months. It may not be important that your child put in time every single day, as with homework, but rather that you get a good five hours per week. It's important to keep track of progress when it comes to these kinds of things. It's easiest to keep that in the same place as the Family Calendar.

Make Sure Your Child Understands How Each Class Works

I often ask students who come to me for help to tell me about their classes. I find that it's helpful for them to think through how each class works. What is the teacher like? What is her teaching style? What does she emphasize in class? What are her expectations? What are the homework assignments like? Will there be quizzes, exams and papers? What will grades be based on? I then ask the student about what he hopes to gain from the class. Are there subjects he'd like to master? Is there a certain grade he hopes to receive? The next step is to come up with some concrete ways to connect how the class works to the student's goal. If the student wants to get an A, what will he need to do on a daily or weekly basis both in the class and at home to achieve his goal?

Use The Buddy System

At one point or another your child is not going to have *the* assignment or *the* book he needs when he needs it. Begging the janitor to let you into the school so you can retrieve it from your child's locker is not a good back up plan. Instead, before you this happens, help your child identify one of his classmates, preferably a reliable one who lives near by, as his back up. When the need arises, it's his responsibility, not yours, to call his buddy for help. Spelling lists can be read over the phone, math sheets can be copied (assuming the answers have not already been written on them), and textbooks can be borrowed for a few hours.

Buy Your Own Set of Back-Up Books

I highly recommend buying your own used set of textbooks to be kept at home. It's easier to master material when you are able to highlight and jot notes down in the margins and having a set of books at home means your child's backpack will be lighter—it's supposed to be no heavier than 10% of your child's weight--and you won't have to worry about not having a book when you need it. Although the price of some textbooks is exorbitant, you can often find reasonably priced used textbooks online.