



# David E. Simai M.D.

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### **Back to School Tips**

The summer vacation is almost over. With the anticipated feelings of joy from seeing the kids back in school, some of us parents wonder how we could do our share to help our kids be "all that they could be" in school.

I decided to share with you some useful information published by the American Academy of Pediatrics in 2009 to help cover common school related issues.

#### **MAKING THE FIRST DAY EASIER**

- Remind your child that she is not the only student who is a bit uneasy about the first day of school. Teachers know that students are anxious and will make an extra effort to make sure everyone feels as comfortable as possible.
- Point out the positive aspects of starting school: It will be fun. She'll see old friends and meet new ones. Refresh her positive memories about previous years, when she may have returned home after the first day with high spirits because she had a good time.
- Find another child in the neighborhood with whom your youngster can walk to school or ride with on the bus.
- If you feel it is appropriate, drive your child (or walk with her) to school and pick her up on the first day.
- Personally, I drove my boys to school last year and made sure that we were first to arrive in the classroom. Then, I asked them each where they would like to sit. My oldest son shared with me that in the previous year he really wanted to sit close to the teacher and could not do so because those seats were already taken. So this year, he was so pleased to be in his desired seat. His joy was easily noticeable when he came home on his first day in 1st grade.

#### **BACKPACK SAFETY**

- Choose a backpack with wide, padded shoulder straps and a padded back.
- Pack light. Organize the backpack to use all of its compartments. Pack heavier items closest to the center of the back. The backpack should never weigh more than 10 to 20 percent of your child's body weight.
- Always use both shoulder straps. Slinging a backpack over one shoulder can strain muscles.
- Consider a rolling backpack. This type of backpack may be a good choice for students who must tote a heavy load. Remember that



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rolling backpacks still must be carried up stairs, and they may be difficult to roll in snow.

### **TRAVELING TO AND FROM SCHOOL**

Review the basic rules with your youngster:

#### **School Bus**

If your child's school bus has lap/shoulder seat belts, make sure your child uses one at all times when in the bus. If your child's school bus does not have lap/shoulder belts, encourage the school to buy or lease buses with lap/shoulder belts.

Wait for the bus to stop before approaching it from the curb.

Do not move around on the bus.

Check to see that no other traffic is coming before crossing the street.

Make sure to always remain in clear view of the bus driver.

Children should always board and exit the bus at locations that provide safe access to the bus or to the school building.

If you ever want to see an enthusiastic mother departing from her school aged kids, drive to a chassidish neighbourhood. As a pediatrician in Kiryas Yoel, Monroe, I often arrived to work as the kids boarded their school buses. Without exception, every mother used to wave, jump, smile and cheer her kids, wishing them a wonderful day in cheder (it seems that they were well versed in the Gemara that points out the reward of women is greater than men because of the unique encouragement they give their kids when parting to school).

#### **Car**

- All passengers should wear a seat belt and/or an age- and size-appropriate car safety seat or booster seat. Remember that in the State of New York, children 4 years *and* 40lb may graduate their car seat and be placed in booster seats.
- Your child should ride in a belt-positioning booster seat until the vehicle's seat belt fits properly (usually when the child reaches about 4' 9" in height and is between 8 to 12 years of age). This means that the child is tall enough to sit against the vehicle seat back with her legs bent at the knees and feet hanging down and the shoulder belt lies across the middle of the chest and shoulder, not the neck or throat; the lap belt is low and snug across the thighs, and not the stomach.
- All children under 13 years of age should ride in the rear seat of vehicles. If you must drive more children than can fit in the rear seat (when carpooling, for example), move the front-seat passenger's seat as far back as possible and have the child ride in a booster seat if the seat belts do not fit properly without it.



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- Remember that many crashes occur while novice teen drivers are going to and from school. You should require seat belt use, limit the number of teen passengers, do not allow eating, drinking, cell phone conversations or texting to prevent driver distraction; and limit nighttime driving and driving in inclement weather. Familiarize yourself with your state's graduated driver license law and consider the use of a parent-teen driver agreement to facilitate the early driving learning process.

### **Walking to School**

- Make sure your child's walk to a school is a safe route with well-trained adult crossing guards at every intersection.
- Be realistic about your child's pedestrian skills. Because small children are impulsive and less cautious around traffic, carefully consider whether or not your child is ready to walk to school without adult supervision.
- If your children are young or are walking to a new school, walk with them the first week to make sure they know the route and can do it safely.
- Bright colored clothing will make your child more visible to drivers.
- In neighborhoods with higher levels of traffic, consider starting a "walking school bus," in which an adult accompanies a group of neighborhood children walking to school.

### **EATING DURING THE SCHOOL DAY**

- Most schools regularly send schedules of cafeteria menus home. With this advance information, you can plan on packing lunch on the days when the main course is one your child prefers not to eat.
- I often recommend that parents whose children are overweight should communicate with their children's school to ensure that they do not get a "refill" of the main course, and that there is always adult supervision when school lunch is being served.
- Try to get your child's school to stock healthy choices such as fresh fruit, low-fat dairy products, water and 100 percent fruit juice in the vending machines.
- Snacks - if you do send snacks to school with your child, try and avoid processed foods (i.e. potato chips, wafers, super snacks and pretzels). Personally, I have had success sending my kids to school with a yogurt and high fiber cereal for my oldest son and cut up apples and oranges with my second to oldest. Do not expect your children to change their preferences overnight. If they are already used to eating the wrong snacks, try and slowly motivate them and educate them to the importance of healthy eating habits.



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- Having said that, to date, I have not found an effective way to prevent children from trading in their healthy snacks for their friend's "junk food".
- Each 12-ounce soft drink contains approximately 10 teaspoons of sugar and 150 calories. Drinking just one can of soda a day increases a child's risk of obesity by 60%. Restrict your child's soft drink consumption.
- As I mentioned in previous articles, juices and sodas are some of the most common causes of the childhood obesity epidemic in the U.S. I strongly urge parents not to bring any soft drinks or fruit juices into their homes (yes, even the 100% pure apple juice fortified with Vitamin C is bad for your children's health).

### **DEVELOPING GOOD HOMEWORK AND STUDY HABITS**

- Create an environment that is conducive to doing homework. Youngsters need a permanent work space in their bedroom or another part of the home that offers privacy.
- Set aside ample time for homework.
- Establish a household rule that the TV set stays off during homework time.
- Supervise computer and internet use.
- Be available to answer questions and offer assistance, but never do a child's homework for her.
- Take steps to help alleviate eye fatigue, neck fatigue and brain fatigue while studying. It may be helpful to close the books for a few minutes, stretch, and take a break periodically when it will not be too disruptive.
- If your child is struggling with a particular subject, and you aren't able to help her yourself, a tutor can be a good solution. Talk it over with your child's teacher first.

Hope this article helped alleviate some of the usual parent anxiety associated with the start of a fresh school year. Let's all hope and pray that our kids will have a productive, safe and healthy year.

Sincerely,

David Elazar Simai M.D.