

A P A R E N T ' S
T O
G U I D E

Back to School

axis

It's time to go back to school!

Anyone? Bueller?

Going back to school can be an exciting time for kids, especially if they enjoy learning or being around their friends. But it can also be a dreadful time for kids who hate the thought of summer ending or whose social interactions have been more painful than pleasant . . . meaning they'd be tempted to pull a Ferris Bueller if they knew what that meant!

Whether your kids are excited to return to school or dread going back, and whether you feel like you were the master of back to school in years past or like it got the best of you, this time of year is not only a routine disrupter, it's full of opportunities to start new. We hope this Guide helps you take advantage of them in order to take steps toward a better family dynamic and helping your kids have a healthy view of education and school.

— What's challenging about the educational side of school?

Something you're probably all too familiar with is how jam packed today's students' schedules are. They probably have a lot of homework to complete each night. If on top of that work they're also involved in music, a sport, or another extracurricular activity, it's likely that their time during the week is maxed out—to the point where they often don't get enough sleep.

It's even harder for kids who are not academically inclined. Besides the challenges that come with completing homework, they might also feel embarrassed that they aren't performing at the same level as their peers. And if your kids have trouble with (or simply don't like) their teachers, getting their work done well is even more complicated.

Add to that the ubiquity of screens, and not only does completing homework become a losing battle, but whatever time was left in their schedules is now spoken for. (Unless, of course, parents implement screen time limits, but that's another task that's often easier said than done, especially if parents themselves are using their own screens a lot).

— So how can I help my kids with it all?

1. Help them navigate their busy schedules.

Given that student workloads can be so heavy, it might be wise for your kids to commit to one activity or to none at all at the very beginning of the school year. We know one teenage girl (a rising sophomore) who's joined student council. But she's limited herself to that commitment until she adjusts to her new routine. Then she plans to add a couple of sports.

Her parents, who are divorced, value both being organized and resting well. When she spends time at her dad's house, she has set time to complete her homework before they

have family time. If she doesn't finish her homework that evening, she gets up early the next morning to finish it before school starts. Her time at her dad's house is highly structured. But because life during the school year is so full and fast-paced, when she's at her mom's house, her mom is careful to make sure that she gets adequate time to rest.

We highly recommend keeping an eye on how much your kids have committed to and help them learn how to organize their schedules so that they have time to rest well. Encourage them to have a full day every week where they only do activities they find restful (truly restful, not simply bingeing Netflix or playing 10 hours straight of video games). We know it can be difficult to consistently set aside this time, and we're not saying you should be legalistic about it. But taking a day of rest is the model God gives us in Scripture, and it's a wonderful habit that takes humility, faith, and wisdom. (Check out our "Parent's Guide to Sabbath & Rest" by expert Dr. Julie Canlis for more!)

And why is this day of rest so important? When we have so much to do every day, it's easy to feel like if we stop working, the world will come crashing down around us. It takes faith to mentally and physically let go of our tasks and trust that God will provide for us. It takes wisdom to prioritize well and maintain our responsibilities so we have the freedom to take the time off.

Aim for an overall habit of rest. There will be times when your kids will need to use their rest time to get some work done. On the other hand, there will be times when your kids have so much going on that they have a legitimate reason to let something slide, whether it's an assignment, practice, or other commitment. Teach them how to use discernment to learn when they need to go the extra mile and when they simply need to take a break. Guiding them in this area now will help them make healthier choices with their time they go to college or join the workforce.

2. Teach them how to deal with difficult teachers.

No doubt about it—some teachers can be intimidating, whether they are extremely strict and or just seem unapproachable. But many teachers (even the scary ones!) appreciate it when students make an effort to succeed in their classes. There's a good chance that your kids can solve their teacher problems if they're simply willing to talk to them. Doing so takes maturity and teaches your kids responsibility. Obviously, how you handle these situations requires discernment on your part and depends on the ages of your kids. If your kids are old enough, encourage them to communicate with their teachers before you step in on their behalf.

We have a friend who used to be a high school teacher. One school year, she had a class of juniors and started the first class off with a strict tone. One of her female students was very intimidated. It turned out that other students had gossiped about the teacher, saying she was unfair and failed students on purpose. So the student's mom called her later that day and started chewing her out over the phone.

The truth was that she had never failed anyone on purpose (a former student had earned a failing grade). And she had every desire to help her students succeed, even while holding them to a high standard. If the girl who was scared had simply talked to the teacher instead of listening to gossip, she could have resolved the issue without relying on her mother's misplaced outrage.

3. Talk to them about anxiety, stress, depression, and other struggles.

The stress of the new school year can be much more intense for some people than for others. Pay attention to how your kids are acting, and don't just assume everything is ok. Even if your kids seem fine, it's always a good idea to talk about stress, anxiety, depression, eating disorders, self-harm, and other afflictions, offering your help and listening ear for anything. Remind them always that you're on their side and that nothing they can say or do will make you love them less.

But if you notice extreme changes in their behavior, signs of cutting or other self-harm, or they become reckless or suicidal, do not hesitate to get professional help. Even younger kids who experience anxiety or depression can always benefit from counseling and therapy, so make sure they know they have the option, and, in extreme cases, you may need to step in and require they get help.

4. Manage screen time.

No matter what age your kids are or how lax you've been with screen time in the past, it's never too late to start restricting their time. Even if they go down kicking and screaming, they (like all of us) need to learn how to put boundaries on their time and their screen usage. If it's tempting for us to never put our phones down or to constantly binge Netflix, imagine how hard it is for them to say no to these temptations! So they also need us to model what healthy screen time is. Create rules for the whole family (including you!) and make sure they know that screen time is a privilege, not a right. Homework, practicing instruments, God's Word, chores, and family time come first, and even then, video games, social media, TV, and movies should not consume the rest of their time. But above all, make sure your kids know why you're doing this (you want what's absolutely best for them, and unrestricted screen time isn't that) and that these aren't just rules for rules' sake.

— What are some other pitfalls to be aware of?

Complaining

The school environment provides an endless list of things to complain about: teachers, the principal, stupid rules, other students, the ridiculous amount of homework, the uniforms, and on and on. In fact, the principal is a common target of complaining. The aforementioned teacher noticed this phenomenon when one of the schools she worked at went through a change in administration.

Under the old principal, the teacher never recalled any students talking about how much they liked him. They either complained about him or didn't talk about him at all. But then the new principal came in, enforcing new policies that the students didn't like. All of a sudden, the students couldn't stop talking about how wonderful the old principal was, how they missed him, and how everything was so much better when he was there.

Focusing on the negative and looking for greener grass is a human tendency. We all do it. It's easy to think we'll be happy if our circumstances were different, even though it's often true that we'd still be unhappy. Encourage your kids not to go with the flow of complaining that is likely all around them. There are healthy ways to be honest about what they don't like. There's also always something to be thankful for, and it's possible

to practice gratefulness without coming off as self-righteous. If they can develop a habit of thankfulness now, it will serve them for the rest of their lives.

“The next thing”

It’s tempting for us to live for a future event we’re excited about, instead of being present where we are right now. With students this often looks like living for the next break. They can’t wait for Fall Break, then Thanksgiving, and then all they can talk about is Christmas. Once they get back from Christmas, they make it through the bleak winter months by dreaming about Spring Break. Summer comes soon after that. Then the school year starts again...and the cycle repeats.

There’s nothing wrong with looking forward to a break and enjoying it when it comes—we already talked about the importance of resting well! But it’s easy to focus so much on the future that we stop being thankful for the time God has given us now and we miss what’s right in front of us. It was only after graduating from college that one friend of ours recognized she had this mentality. She then realized that if she were to live the rest of her life with this mentality, she would basically be wishing her life away, living for breaks and vacations until she died. So she decided to start being thankful for what God had given her right then, even if it meant hard work.

— What are some of the social challenges of school?

Finding One’s Place

Adolescence is a time of figuring out who you are and where you fit in. If your kids are popular or at least have a social circle, returning to school is probably not that much of an issue for them, socially speaking. But if they are new to the school, introverted, an “outcast,” or shy, going back to school can be daunting. If their school is small and they don’t fit in with any of the groups there, your kids are probably dreading the start of the year.

Even the non-wallflowers can have their social difficulties. It could be that over the summer the friends they had at the end of the last school year never invited them to do anything, revealing that they weren’t that close of friends. One teen we know says that when you don’t see your school friends all summer and then you all go back to school, you find that the dynamics of who you and they are have changed. For example, if two people were best friends last year, but are not close anymore this year, everyone in their friend group has adjust to this new dynamic. Maybe people’s personalities changed over the summer or someone reinvented him/herself. Or maybe your kids and their friends simply grew up a little.

Peer Pressure

We all know and have experienced peer pressure, but as our kids get older and approach the tween/teen years, they face things many of us never faced, like sexting, vaping (aka juuling), social media, and more. Not only will it help to be prepared for what they might face rather than be blindsided by it and therefore unsure how to react, it helps if know that they can talk to you about anything without judgment or reaction.

So first, practice your “I’m not shocked” face. Seriously. Next time you’re in front of

a mirror, imagine your child telling you something that is extremely shocking and do your best not to show your emotions in your face. (You can let it all out later when talking to your spouse or your friends.) This will help them feel safe in coming to you, and it will help you not to lose it and react rashly. And second, in order to learn more about what your kids might face, subscribe to our free weekly email that's all about teen culture (go to axis.org/ct to sign up) and check out our other Parent Guides covering the topics mentioned above and many more at axis.org/guides.

Dating, Hooking Up, and Romance

The pressure to date (or “talk” or “hook up” or be in some sort of romantic entanglement) usually increases as we get older. So your tweens and teens might start taking a new interest in dating or might become obsessed with it. And while romance isn't inherently bad, it's a great opportunity to disciple our kids to keep it in a healthy place in their lives and to learn to view others as humans, not simply as potential significant others. Check out our “[Parent's Guide to Teen Dating](#)” for more on this.

Bullying

Not only does the new school year mean a new chance for kids to be bullied, it also means they might start bullying. It's important to talk to your kids about strategies for dealing with bullies, as well as how to avoid becoming the bully (whether at school or online). Our upcoming “Parent's Guide to (Cyber)bullying” will cover this much more in depth.

How can I help my kids grow socially?

A benefit of committing to one extracurricular activity at the start of the school year is that doing so can help kids get involved with other students before the year starts. The girl we know who joined student council says that a lot of students on the council are hanging out in the weeks leading up to the first day of school. If your kids want to join a sport at the beginning of the year, teams often start training before school starts. These are ways your kids can naturally get to know people without awkwardly trying to break into a new friend group.

Are your kids aware when someone is being excluded from a group? Whether they tend to hang on the fringes themselves or have a group of friends they hang out with, encourage your students to notice when other people are being left out and to reach out to those people. ***Social capital is exactly that—a type of wealth.*** If God has blessed them with wealth in the form of friendships, how can they be generous with what they have been given? [One mom](#) helped her daughter see how simply excluding others is a form of bullying (albeit a more socially acceptable one), so she required her to talk to and find out interesting things about the girl she wouldn't include.

If your students struggle socially, how can you help them make friends? Be careful here. You might be tempted to give them advice and try to “fix” the situation, but they need your empathy and understanding more than anything else. Making new friends is incredibly challenging for some kids. If they have tried to make friends and keep striking out, encourage them to pray that God would provide a friend and/or a friend group for them. This can help them see how God works (even if it's different than we expect!) and to grow in their faith.

That being said, there might not be an immediate solution. We know people who simply struggled to find good friends when they were teenagers. Adolescence was a hard time for them. **Make sure your kids know that they have your unconditional love and support, no matter what.**

Ask yourself this from time to time: **How much am I focusing on their emotional health and social lives versus their academic performance?** Clearly, the point of school is education, so it's right to focus on how your kids are doing academically. But it's easy to overemphasize the intellect and ignore the fact that there are [other types of "intelligences"](#) that are totally valid (or that their social struggles might matter more right now than their academic achievements).

Kids who are highly intuitive or have athletic prowess can feel like inadequate if they don't perform well in the more "brainy" disciplines. American education also tends to emphasize going to a university of higher learning over learning a trade, even though the latter is a perfectly legitimate (and [possibly more lucrative](#)) way to earn a living.

Your kids need to know that you love them no matter how they perform in any area. They also need you to validate the strengths they do have, even if those strengths are not the ones that society praises or that you hoped they would have.

— **How might the new school year affect my family as a whole?**

Besides the academic and social obstacles your kids face at school, another major challenge is the change to your overall family routine. No more staying up late and sleeping in till lunchtime! There's a host of logistics to figure out, from transportation to a completely new set of schedules.

If you are in a single-parent or divorced family, school starting could mean that you get to see your kids less. We know one single mom who gets to see her teenage daughter a lot over the summer because there's the freedom in the schedule for them to do more overnight stays. But because school introduces a more structured routine, their time gets limited to a few hours in the evening or time on the weekends. The result is that they have to be more intentional with the time they do have.

— **How can I make the most of these stresses to my family?**

Based on what you know about your kids and the environment they're going into, try to identify what will stress them out about starting school, and do what you can to alleviate their stress in advance.

For example, you could:

- Make them go to bed earlier and get up earlier a few days or a week before school starts.
- Let them see their school, classrooms, and locker before the school year starts.

One school we know lets the incoming freshman start a day earlier than the other students. The student council helps orient the incoming 9th graders so that the freshman don't have to start their school year completely overwhelmed by the chaos of the other, more experienced students returning at the same time.

- Help them to feel comfortable with how they look. You might think this is superficial, but body image is a big deal, and adolescence is a time when people feel embarrassment keenly. Many recognize the importance of appearance in the workplace or for job interviews, so how much more important is it for teens who are often highly aware of what their peers are thinking of them?
- Find out if they have friends in any of their classes so they know if they'll go into the year expecting to see a familiar face.

— What opportunities does the new school year offer my family?

American life is busy, and each season brings its own flavor of busyness. With all of the homework, extracurricular activities, sports, and social events that your kids have going on in the fall, it can be difficult for your family to connect on a consistent basis. **But think about this: when you look back on your life, will you be happier that you got a lot of tasks done or happier that you spent consistent quality time together as a family?** Do your best to set aside at least one part of the day when you all can touch base with each other.

Because so much changes about your kids' and your family's routines at the beginning of the school year, it's a great opportunity to start new family habits. You could also take a break from some of your old ones to try something new. For example, you could pray together in the morning or have dinner together. You could take [after-dinner walks](#), read a book together, or watch (and then talk about!) a show you all enjoy.

If dinner is your priority, try to use the time well without being super intense about it. For example, we know a couple with two young kids. At some point during dinner, the parents ask each person say his or her "high" and "low" from the day. "How was your day?" can become rote, and "Fine" is definitely a habitual answer. Asking people for the highs and lows of their day is a way of hearing an answer that is more likely to be informative and interesting. Plus, it's a question that kids of any age can answer.

You can even use the opportunity for new routines as a way of building rest for yourself and your spouse into your schedule. That same couple has made it policy for one of them to get a night "off" one day per week. One night during the week, the husband gets the evening to himself and his wife takes care of cleaning up after dinner and getting the kids to bed. The next week, it's the wife's turn to have an evening free, so her husband takes care of the kids and the cleaning.

Whatever habits you decide to start, don't implement them without explaining to your kids what you are doing and why. And don't forget to get their feedback! They might be too timid to bring up something they don't like or to mention an idea they've had. Allow them the chance to be part of the decision making.

— What do I do about the threat of a school shooting?

Sadly, school shootings have only become more prevalent in the news since the Columbine shooting in 1999. It would be naïve to think that one couldn't happen at the school your kids attend. Think about how you could prepare them for being on campus with an active shooter. See our upcoming "Parent's Guide to School Shootings" for more information and also check out the book [The Journals of Rachel Scott: A Journey of Faith at Columbine High](#) for teaching your kids how to have compassion for others, as well as how to stand strong during scary times.

— Discussion Questions

- Is there anything you're looking forward to about going back to school?
- Is there anything you're worried or anxious about?
- Is there any way we can help make going back to school easier for you?
- Was there anything we did last year that made the school year hard for you?
- Was there anything we did that made the year easier?
- How could you specifically help other students feel included instead of excluded?
- How could you get to know some new people this year? What do you find hardest about making friends?
- Do you notice that you tend to get caught up in other people's complaining? If you do, how could you prevent this from happening?
- What are ways you can practice thankfulness, no matter what situation you're in?
- Do you have any ideas about how you can rest well when the school year gets really busy?
- If there was one (plausible) thing you wish you could take off your plate this school year, what would it be?
- What's one area you'd like prayer in?

— Takeaway

Even if you have the back-to-school experience down by now, there are always new challenges to navigate and new ways you can connect with your kids. Hopefully we made a few suggestions that have piqued your interest. Pick one or two and see how they work for your family!

— Related Axis Resources

To read before talking to your kids (all of which can be found at axis.org/guides):

- A Parent's Guide to Sabbath & Rest
- A Parent's Guide to Depression & Anxiety
- A Parent's Guide to Self-Harm & Suicide

- A Parent's Guide to Vaping/Juuling
- A Parent's Guide to Teen Dating
- A Parent's Guide to Video Games
- A Parent's Guide to Smartphones
- A Parent's Guide to School Shootings (coming soon!)

Additional Resources

- "[Family routines: how and why they work](#)," raisingchildren.net
- "[Is My Teen's Sleep Normal?](#)" sleep.org
- [Rachel's Tears](#) by Beth Nimmo, Darrell Scott, and Steve Rabey

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