

Back to School Tips

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The following health and safety tips are from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). Feel free to excerpt these tips or use them in their entirety in any print or broadcast story, with acknowledgment of source.

MAKING THE FIRST DAY EASIER

- If your child seems nervous, remind your child that there are probably a lot of students who are uneasy about the first day of school. This may be at any age. Teachers know that students are nervous and will make an extra effort to make sure everyone feels as comfortable as possible.
- Point out the positive aspects of starting school to create positive anticipation about the first day of class. 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 student can walk to school or ride on the bus.
- If it is a new school for your child, attend any available orientations and take an opportunity to tour the school before the first day.
- If you feel it is needed, drive your child (or walk with her) to school and pick her up on the first day.

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. Go through the pack with your child weekly, and remove unneeded items to keep it light.
- Always use both shoulder straps. Slinging a backpack over one shoulder can strain muscles.
- Adjust the pack so that the bottom sits at the waist.
- If your school allows, consider a rolling backpack. This type of backpack may be a good choice for students who must tote a heavy load. Remember that rolling backpacks still must be carried up stairs, they may be difficult to roll in snow, and they may not fit in some lockers.

TRAVELING TO AND FROM SCHOOL

Review the basic rules with your student:

School Bus

- Children should always board and exit the bus at locations that provide safe access to the bus or to the school building.
- Remind your child to wait for the bus to stop before approaching it from the curb.
- Make sure your child walks where she can see the bus driver (which means the driver will be able to see her, too).
- Remind your student to look both ways to see that no other traffic is coming before crossing the street, just in case traffic does not stop as required.
- Your child should not move around on the 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 system to buy or lease buses with lap/shoulder belts).
- Check on the school's policy regarding food on the bus. Eating on the bus can present a problem for students with allergy and also lead to infestations of insects and vermin on the vehicles.
- If your child has a chronic condition that could result in an emergency on the bus, make sure you work with the school nurse or other school health personnel to have a bus emergency plan.

Car

- All passengers should wear a seat belt or use an age- and size-appropriate car safety seat or booster seat.
- Your child should ride in a car safety seat with a harness as long as possible and then ride in a belt-positioning booster seat. Your child is ready for a booster seat when she has reached the top weight or height allowed for her seat, her shoulders are above the top harness slots, or her ears have reached the top of the seat.

- 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, not the stomach.
- All children younger than 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.
- 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, and do not allow eating, drinking, cell phone conversations even when using hands-free devices or speakerphone, texting or other mobile device use to prevent driver distraction. Limit nighttime driving and driving in inclement weather. Familiarize yourself with your state's graduated driver's license law and consider the use of a parent-teen driver agreement to facilitate the early driving learning process. For a sample parent-teen driver agreement, see www.healthychildren.org/teendriver

Bike

- Always wear a bicycle helmet, no matter how short or long the ride.
- Ride on the right, in the same direction as auto traffic and ride in bike lanes if they are present.
- Use appropriate hand signals.
- Respect traffic lights and stop signs.
- Wear bright-colored clothing to increase visibility. White or light-colored clothing and reflective gear is especially important after dark.
- Know the "rules of the road."

Walking to School

- Make sure your child's walk to school is a safe route with well-trained adult crossing guards at every intersection.
- Identify other children in the neighborhood with whom your child can walk to school. In neighborhoods with higher levels of traffic, consider organizing a "walking school bus," in which an adult accompanies a group of neighborhood children walking to school.
- 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 or have another adult walk with them the first week or until you are sure they know the route and can do it safely.
- Bright-colored clothing will make your child more visible to drivers.

EATING DURING THE SCHOOL DAY

- Studies show that children who eat a nutritious breakfast function better. They do better in school, and have better concentration and more energy.
- Most schools regularly send schedules of cafeteria menus home and/or have them posted on the school's website. 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.
- Many school districts have plans which allow you to pay for meals through an online account. Your child will get a card to "swipe" at the register. This is a convenient way to handle school meal accounts.
- Look into what is offered inside and outside of the cafeteria, including vending machines, a la carte, school stores, snack carts and fundraisers held during the school day. All foods sold during the school day must meet nutrition standards established by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA). They should stock healthy choices such as fresh fruit, low-fat dairy products, water and 100 percent fruit juice. Learn about your child's school wellness policy and get involved in school groups to put it into effect.
- 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%. Choose healthier options (such as water and appropriately sized juice and low-fat dairy products) to send in your child's lunch.

BULLYING

Bullying or cyberbullying is when one child picks on another child repeatedly. Bullying can be physical, verbal, or social. It can happen at school, on the playground, on the school bus, in the neighborhood, over the Internet, or through mobile devices like cell phones.

When Your Child Is Bullied

- Alert school officials to the problems and work with them on solutions.
- Teach your child when and how to ask a trusted adult for help.
- Recognize the serious nature of bullying and acknowledge your child's feelings about being bullied.
- Help your child learn how to respond by teaching your child how to:
 1. Look the bully in the eye.
 2. Stand tall and stay calm in a difficult situation.
 3. Walk away.
- Teach your child how to say in a firm voice.
 1. "I don't like what you are doing."
 2. "Please do NOT talk to me like that."
 3. "Why would you say that?"
- Encourage your child to make friends with other children.
- Support activities that interest your child.
- Make sure an adult who knows about the bullying can watch out for your child's safety and well-being when you cannot be there.
- Monitor your child's social media or texting interactions so you can identify problems before they get out of hand.

When Your Child Is the Bully

- Be sure your child knows that bullying is never OK.
- Set firm and consistent limits on your child's aggressive behavior.
- Be a positive role model. Show children they can get what they want without teasing, threatening or hurting someone.
- Use effective, non-physical discipline, such as loss of privileges.
- Develop practical solutions with the school principal, teachers, school social workers or psychologists, and parents of the children your child has bullied.

When Your Child Is a Bystander

- Encourage your child to tell a trusted adult about the bullying. Encourage your child to join with others in telling bullies to stop.
- Help your child support other children who may be bullied. Encourage your child to include these children in activities.

BEFORE AND AFTER SCHOOL CHILD CARE

- During early and middle childhood, youngsters need supervision. A responsible adult should be available to get them ready and off to school in the morning and supervise them after school until you return home from work.
- If a family member will care for your child, communicate the need to follow consistent rules set by the parent regarding discipline and homework.
- Children approaching adolescence (11- and 12-year-olds) should not come home to an empty house in the afternoon unless they show unusual maturity for their age.
- If alternate adult supervision is not available, parents should make special efforts to supervise their children from a distance. Children should have a set time when they are expected to arrive at home and should check in with a neighbor or with a parent by telephone.
- If you choose a commercial after-school program, inquire about the training of the staff. There should be a high staff-to-child ratio, trained persons to address health issues and emergencies, and the rooms and the playground should be safe.

DEVELOPING GOOD HOMEWORK AND STUDY HABITS

- Create an environment that is conducive to doing homework starting at a young age. Children need a consistent work space in their bedroom or another part of the home that is quiet, without distractions, and promotes study.
- Schedule ample time for homework; build this time into choices about participation in after school activities.
- Establish a household rule that the TV and other electronic distractions stay off during homework time.
- Supervise computer and Internet use.
- By high school, it's not uncommon for teachers to ask students to submit homework electronically and perform other tasks on a computer. If your child doesn't have access to a computer or the internet at home, work with teachers and school administration to develop appropriate accommodations.
- 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, speak with your child's teacher for recommendations on how you or another person can help your child at home or at school. If you have concerns about the assignments your child is receiving, talk with their teacher.

- If your child is having difficulty focusing on or completing homework, discuss this with your child's teacher, school counselor, or health care provider.
- For general homework problems that cannot be worked out with the teacher, a tutor may be considered.
- Some children need help organizing their homework. Checklists, timers, and parental supervision can help overcome homework problems.
- Some children may need help remembering their assignments. Work with your child and their teacher to develop an appropriate way to keep track of their assignments – such as an assignment notebook. Establish a good sleep routine. Insufficient sleep is associated with lower academic achievement in middle school, high school and college, as well as higher rates of absenteeism and tardiness. The optimal amount of sleep for most adolescents (13-18 year of age) is in the range of 8-10 hours per night.

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