

Surviving the September Rush

Overview

Ways to make life easier when your family returns to work and school in September.

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Late summer and early fall can be the most challenging time of the year for busy families. Going back to school and work can mean that everybody has to shift gears. Your child may start back to school in late August or in September. The fall rush will be easier if you plan ahead for schedule changes and prepare for emergencies that might come up. This will help ease your return back into fall routines.

Back-to-school tips

Going back to school in September is a big adjustment for most kids. You can help by taking a few practical steps to ease the adjustment to a different routine for your child.

- *Try to return from vacation at least two or three days before school starts.* Children and teenagers need to make both physical and mental adjustments when they go back to school. A few days of “breathing room” after vacation or summer camp lets them ease into the changes and gives you time to take care of any last-minute needs that come up.
- *Help your children start going to bed at school bedtimes a week before school begins.* Try to have them get up earlier, too. Many teenagers become so used to staying up late that they have problems getting up in the morning when they return to school. Getting them up a little earlier before school starts can prevent struggles in September.
- *Start limiting TV and instituting reading times a week or two before starting school.* For many children, the structure required for homework is a big adjustment. Children need to keep their brains active all year, not just for the nine months while they are in school. If children haven't been reading all summer, make a trip to the library in August to find some books of interest to them. Many libraries also have summer reading programs that reward children for reading time.
- *Visit or revisit a new school.* If you have a child or teenager who will be starting a new school, the change may be especially stressful. Try to visit the new school before the first day of classes, so your child is familiar with the location of places like classrooms and the cafeteria. If you have just moved into the school district, ask the school about corresponding with another child who will be in your child's class. Arrange a play date or get-together if possible so that your child knows someone on the first day. Be sensitive to the needs of teenagers who may want to visit a new school on their own.

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- *If you have a computer or access to one at a library, visit the Web sites for your children's schools.* Visiting these Web sites can help you plan for the new school year. These sites may have announcements about last-minute changes in schedules or programs, and helpful reminders about information you received in the mail over the summer. Information may also be available about uniforms and/or the dress code. Becoming more acquainted with the school in this way may also help children and teenagers become excited about going back to school.
- *Make any needed medical, dental, and eye-care visits at the start of the summer, rather than waiting until the end-of-summer rush.* Keep in mind that many parents and children schedule medical appointments for August, and it may take longer than usual to get an appointment. Many provinces have immunization requirements for children at different ages. Follow your school's guidelines to make those appointments well before school starts.
- *Review your children's allowances or pocket money.* You may need to adjust these to reflect changing school fees or the costs of lunches, transportation, or activities.
- *If you have vacation time left, take a day off from work and spend it with your children or teenagers.* Establish a tradition for the end of summer -- a special movie day, or trip to a special place. Let them know how important they are to you.
- *If possible, consider working a shorter day on the first day of school.* This is another way to show children that you are interested in their lives, and may help to ease the transition into school routines.
- *Make sure you know the school bus route and schedule.* Some children may find it reassuring to walk to the school bus stop a few times and see the route that the bus will take, including where it will drop them off at school. For younger children, attach a card to their backpack with the bus number on it so that they can match the numbers. Also label clearly the stop where they get off so that they can show it to the bus driver if they are confused. Drive them along the route so that they know to anticipate landmarks.
- *Do something fun to mark the transition back to school.* Have a special family meal together. Look at last year's school photos to see how much everybody has grown. Buy a new lunch bag, backpack, notebook, or assignment book.

Getting everybody's clothes ready

- *Find out about dress codes before you shop, especially if your child will be starting a new school.* Some schools don't allow T-shirts with certain kinds of messages on them. Others don't allow shorts, tank tops, or very short skirts. Schools may send lists of their requirements home before school starts or post them on their Web sites. If uniforms are required, ask about places to shop second-hand.
- *Go through your children's clothes and shoes together with them.* Weed out the clothes that are too small or cannot be altered. Make a realistic assessment of what they can still wear, and draw up a list of any new items you'll need to buy. Don't forget to include items such as sports or Girl Scout/Boy Scout uniforms. Consider having a yard sale or donating old clothes to a local charity.
- *Sort through old or outgrown toys and possessions, too.* If you'll be having a yard sale or giving old clothes to charity, you may want to include toys and other possessions. Getting rid of old or unused belongings may remove distractions from children's or teenagers' rooms and make it easier for them to focus on schoolwork.
- *Don't leave shopping for shoes or clothes until the day before school starts.* Many stores have back-to-school sales in August. Shop early for the widest selection. If back-to-school shopping at crowded malls tends to leave you feeling tense and exhausted, consider doing some shopping through catalogues or on the Internet.
- *If you have a teenager, you might want to wait to buy some items until after school starts.* Teenagers often want to look like their peers and may reject clothes you've bought for them. Let them check out what their peers are wearing the first week of school, and then take them shopping. This way, you may avoid wasting time returning items later.
- *Go through your own wardrobe and figure out which clothes you still wear.* Some experts recommend getting rid of work or everyday clothes that you haven't worn in two years. You may have clothes that you want to keep but can't wear until you lose weight or that are not appropriate for the current season. Put them in the attic or in a separate closet, so you won't waste time sorting through them as you get ready for work each day.
- *Pick out clothes the night before.* You and your children will find mornings less hectic if you pick out clothes the night before. To make getting dressed easier for younger children, you might put a hook on the back of their closet doors and encourage them to hang the next day's clothes there to separate them from others.
- *Assemble outfits on hangers.* Another way to save time searching for something to wear is to put together complete outfits -- including accessories -- and hang them together in your closet. Do this when you have a few hours of free time and reassemble outfits when you're putting away laundry. Slacks or a skirt, a shirt, and a jacket will fit on a single suit hanger, which you can buy at discount department stores.

Working out before- and after-school care and backup care

No matter how carefully you organize your schedule, you'll face situations you hadn't expected. Your child or your child care provider may get sick. School may close for bad weather, or you may need to work an extended shift. At these times, you'll need to find backup care. The best time to plan for that care is before school starts.

- *Talk with friends, neighbours, relatives, and other parents who may be willing to offer, share, or trade care.* Find out if you can count on them for occasional backup care and, if so, how much advance notice they would need in order to help out. Friends and family may be your best and only option if your child is mildly ill. Offer to help them in return when you're off work. Most child care providers cannot take children who have fevers, sore throats, or stomach flu symptoms.
- *Know your options at work.* Make sure you understand your company's time-off, sick day, and family leave policies so you'll know how much flexibility you have when an emergency comes up. Your employer may also be able to help with backup care arrangements.
- *Call your provider at least a week before school starts to review your arrangement.* Plan for the times when you know you'll need backup care. Get the school calendar and check the dates for vacations, Monday holidays, and early release days. Ask about your provider's availability on these days.
- *Find out if your regular care provider or sitter can suggest or help you find substitute care.* If she knows someone who might help, try to talk to the potential substitute before an emergency arises and schedule a time to meet the person. Bring your child with you to the meeting.
- *See if any family child care providers or child care centres in your area offer backup or drop-in care.* Some centres provide care for extra children as an extension of their regular services. For example, a YMCA, YWCA, or Jewish Community Centre in your area might have a drop-in program. To take advantage of this kind of program, you may have to join the organization and/or pre-register before a crisis arises.
- *Contact in-home care and nanny agencies.* Some of these can send a provider to your home on short notice. Your employee resource program can give you referrals and resources.
- *Look into extended-day or after-school programs.* Some schools and child care centres offer coverage before and after school and on holidays or early release days.
- *Work out any carpool or transportation arrangements.* Make these arrangements as early as possible to avoid last-minute surprises, such as finding out that there's no space left in a carpool you expected to join. If the arrangements will change on certain days of the week, put up the schedule in a central place. Post a list of the names and phone numbers of other parents in the carpool, too.

Making the transition easier for your family

The first weeks of fall can be hectic for everybody. A little advance planning can make the transition back to school and work easier.

- *Make a list of everything you need to do before school starts.* Your children may want to make their own lists of things they need to do.
- *Go over new arrangements and routines with your family at least a couple of days before school starts.* Talk about carpool or transportation plans, what will happen before and after school, and any new providers. Remember that some children may need to hear about these arrangements several times to feel comfortable with them. If it helps, provide a page with written instructions for older children.
- *Label everything that your child will be taking to school.* This should include coats, backpacks, lunch boxes and water bottles. For safety reasons, items should never be labelled with the child's name easily visible from the outside. While labelling items for the start of school, go ahead and label winter gear (hats, scarves, gloves, boots). This prevents the mad rush when cold weather hits unexpectedly.
- *Make sure that your children always have your work number with them while they are at school and extracurricular activities.* They should also have your cell phone number if you have one. Encourage your child to keep these numbers in a wallet, backpack, or locker. For younger children, tape contact information inside the backpack, or put your business card into their shoe. If you're away from a phone frequently, let your child know how to reach you in an emergency, or give them the name of a friend or relative that they can always reach.
- *Review household chores with everyone in your family.* You might have a family meeting to talk about all the chores that need to be done and divide up the tasks together. You may want to post the assignments on a bulletin board or list them in a family file on a home computer.
- *If you have preschoolers, find ways to include them in the preparations, so they'll understand that changes are coming.* You may need to explain to preschoolers that their older brothers or sisters won't be home all day any more, but that your family will still be able to do many things together after school and on weekends.

Getting your household organized for the September rush

- *Put up a family calendar in a central place.* Write down everyone's schedules, using different coloured markers or pens for each person. If all of the people in your family use a home computer, you might also put a copy of the calendar or schedules in a family file on the computer. Some children or teenagers might refer to this more frequently than a written list.
- *Give each member of the family a place to store things for school and work.* This could be a spot on a hall table or a shelf or a plastic cube near the door. Getting out of

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the house on time in the morning will be easier if family members make a habit of putting things -- such as signed school forms and completed homework assignments - - in a designated place the night before.

- *Buy a special folder with sections or other filing system to help organize school papers and all the forms you'll need to fill out.* Use a different slot or folder for each class or activity -- your teenager's guitar lessons, your school-age child's drama club, your spouse's bowling league, or your book club.

Returning to work after vacation

Here are some ways to ease the return to work after a vacation:

- *Start adjusting your own sleep routines.* You'll feel ready to face the challenges of work.
- *Work out your carpool or transportation arrangements.* Keep in mind that buses and trains often change their schedules after Labour Day. You can often download updated schedules from the appropriate Web site. Obtain in advance the schedules you may need.
- *Connect with friends and family before the rush begins.* Take time to call or visit the important people in your life. Try to keep a balance in your schedule.
- *Make some time for yourself every day.* Don't neglect your own needs in the rush to get your children ready for school. Try to put aside a few minutes every day to read, go for a walk, or call a friend. If you seem rushed or distracted, your spouse and children may pick up on it and hesitate to approach you about their concerns.
- *Don't forget to re-establish your exercise routines.* Often when we return from being off work, we feel so caught up in the things that need to be done that we don't want to take time to be healthy. Eating a nutritious diet and exercising daily will help us to have more energy to face the onslaught we may feel at work.
- *Consider making a lunch date with co-workers for your first day back to catch up on work and to reconnect.* You and your co-workers will have a lot to catch up on, but you may find extra work piled up that needs immediate attention. If you sit down and eat together on your first day back on the job, you can catch up without taking time away from your work.
- *Plan ahead for child care for the first day back.* If you assume you may need to work a little late, you'll feel less crunched for time while you are working and will be better able to meet the challenges of returning to work.

Finally, remember that changes in your family's schedule are bound to arise. Try to relax when this happens and to take things in stride.

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