

Organize Now for School without Stress

by Helen Kornblum

Are you still in vacation mode, enjoying the pool and a relaxed schedule? The calendar's reminders that the children will be returning to school soon may change the tempo of life in your household and create stress. In addition to the more compressed timetable that school imposes, what causes stress for you and your family during the school year? The answers might be different in each household, but the solutions spring from some universal behaviors that you and your children can adapt to help maintain balance and family harmony.

How did your family deal with the past school year? If there were ongoing difficulties would your list look something like this?

- * Scheduling of multiple and often competing activities
- * Rushed departures, missed buses, forgotten lunches or lunch money
- * Misplaced flyers, homework assignments, permission forms
- * Last-minute requests for participation or supplies
- * Hectic evenings that feature scant time for homework and late bedtimes
- * Insufficient quiet time for calm meals and relaxed conversations

Even the most resilient families experience moments of unpredictable chaos. But families can function smoothly, despite setbacks, by using organizing strategies that encourage calm and control.

Planning Together

Resilient families are organized to accommodate everyone's schedules and needs. Often they have to compromise to achieve balance, but they do it well ahead of time to avoid conflict. These families use a planning system—a paper calendar, a blackboard, a computer program, or a personal digital assistant (PDA). The choice of hard copy or electronic planner may include preferences for size, format, and portability. It's a good idea to have the children use the planner if they are old enough.

You can teach the family to use the planner by holding a weekly planning meeting. Why not practice now with their remaining summer activities? Once school information starts to flow home, add dates and times to the planner. Start with the basic schedules so you can anticipate conflicts with extra-curricular activities. You can't be in two places at once, but you can avoid putting yourself or a child in this situation by making adjustments for double booking well in advance.

The children will enjoy the planning session, especially if you couple it with a dessert or some other pleasant routine. Gradually they will learn to add or give you notes from school handouts that they receive in class. During the week you can review the calendar with them to develop their planning habits.

Information in the planner will allow you to create To Do lists that match upcoming events, such as buying supplies in advance of a school project. It will alert you to the likely arrival of permission slips for upcoming field trips. It will enable you to adjust the family's activities when any one person has an especially busy week. Having an overview puts you in better control of events by helping you feel prepared.

Not surprisingly, the children will benefit from their involvement in planning. Children don't like jarring surprises any more than you do. They thrive on routines because knowing what's going to happen gives them a sense of well-being and security. Although children have a different sense of time, talking about what's going to happen "later" or "tomorrow," or "this term" is the early training ground for time-management skills. Give each child his or her own calendar; nonreaders can begin by using stickers or pasted pictures.

A Realistic Sense of Time

Knowing what is scheduled for a busy Monday isn't the complete key to family success. Another planning muscle that needs to be exercised is a realistic sense of time--how long each activity takes and what you have to do to get ready for it and then clean up after it. This can be a hard lesson to teach children.

Try engineering some activities to help the children understand sequences and the passage of time. Have them keep a log, for example, on how long it takes for a particular activity, such as baking a cake with you or doing a special craft project. You can also set time limits for daily routines, such as bath and bedtime rituals. Have the children set the timer or alarm to help them gain perspective on how long something takes. If your 9-year old asks you to let him go outside to play after dinner, promising that he'll do his homework "later," you'll have a schedule against which he has to measure just how much time he really has and what his priority must be on a school night.

A Sense of Calm and Accomplishment

Planning builds habits. Habits become embedded into routines. Routines allow us to perform certain activities automatically, eliminating the stress of decision-making or wasting time on behaviors that don't require much focus. Ultimately, we create more time for ourselves and our families when we move through the mechanics of our day without arguments or hassles. And for families, that extra time can be put to good use in enrichment activities, celebrations, and community involvement.

Reducing stress during the school year has many rewards. Start with small changes and help the children practice. Encourage them by showcasing their success, which in turn benefits the family. Using good tools and a confident mindset, you can help your family enjoy a smooth school year.

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