



# *Intentionally and proactively supporting your child(ren) and family before the transition back to school*

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With more laid-back screen time usage, camps, vacations, playdates and opportunities for sleeping-in, summertime allows families and children to live at a slower pace, rejuvenate and restore. The transition from summertime back to the whirlwind of school and extra-curricular activities can be stressful and requires adjustment and support. The following are intentional and proactive ways that can help you gradually scale back summer habits and ease into a school-friendly mind set. As you review this list (and resources below) consider the specific areas that your child can benefit from support in and remember to prioritize your plans based on your child's unique areas of strengths and needs so neither you nor your child feel stressed or overwhelmed.

## *Talk about what will change and validate feelings:*

Talk to your child about their feelings and expectations regarding returning to school. (Talking can include drawing pictures or playing about school for younger ones). Validate their concerns and offer support as well as strong messages about your belief faith in their abilities to overcome challenges and evaluate whether it is a problem they need help solving or if support through the stress is what your child needs. Read age-appropriate books about feelings and about school that will normalize feelings and promote their ability to express their feelings. Teach and practice relaxation and coping strategies to deal with stress during calm times.



## *Set a daily schedule:*

If your child(ren) struggles with transitions (especially transitioning from preferred to non-preferred activities), it could be helpful to practice for the school days that require multiple transitions. Setting a schedule for the last two weeks of summer that more closely mimics your child's school schedule can help ease the adjustment to the transitions during school. Depending on your child's age and grade level, you can create a daily schedule that follows time blocks of different activities including lunch time. Plan with your child how they would like to fill their different time blocks. If changing your schedule is not practical for your family, practicing the concept of transitions in the schedule by setting reminders or times of transitions can give your child a preview of when transitions will occur. You can say: "right now is when we would be walking to school" and "this is when you'll be eating lunch in school".

## *Shift bedtime:*

Bedtime naturally shifts over the course of the summer to a later time in the evening. If your child's summer bedtime is significantly different than your planned school time bedtime, consider starting to move their bedtime back by about 20 minutes a night gradually over a two-week period until you reach the planned bedtime schedule by the night before school. You can still expect some jitters and bedtime challenges the night before school starts no matter how you've prepared!



### *Teach and practice bedtime hygiene:*

Teach and practice bedtime routines that will help your child adopt healthy bedtime habits that allow their bodies and minds to be in a relaxed state. Due to screen's blue light emission and its effect on circadian rhythm, screens should be put to bed at least 30 minutes before bedtime. Calm music, low lights, nature sounds, reading or calming meditations can be great ways to foster relaxation. To have a better chance of following your bedtime routine consistently and in a way that is predictable, create lists or visuals that will support your child's understanding of what is expected and provide a clear structure that would allow them to participate with a sense of autonomy and agency.

### *Set the morning routine:*

Getting to the point of leaving the house in the morning can be one of the most stressful times of the day for families. Creating a morning routine collaboratively with your child promotes a sense of predictability and agency which leads to increased capacity and cooperation to get out the door. A visual schedule with the child's pictures performing the different morning tasks is best for younger children or those who learn best through visual cues. Task apps can be helpful for creating checklists for older children. Practice the morning routines prior to the end of summer so that you can trouble shoot and feel prepared. Some families find it fun to reverse roles during their practice, and younger children often enjoy

a demonstration using miniatures or stuffed animals, and then practice through play.

### *Set new screen time expectations:*

Have conversations with your child about your intentional goals and limits for screen use during the school year. This includes how much time, what time of day, and the content of their screen time activities. Some children do well with a screen time wind-down after school, while it can make a transition more challenging for others. Decide what your screen time limits include: socializing, social media, individual play, watching short videos, whole shows, or educational videos, or playing educational games. Collaborate on screen time limits, test the limits for a week or two, and go back to the drawing board as needed. Media blockers can be used as part of the family plan. Monitor and adjust your own screen use to provide modeling and show your child that you share their struggle. In addition, you can use this time as an opportunity to talk with your child about digital wellness and safety.



### *Support and practice separation:*

At any age, separation can be difficult for many children, especially following a prolonged period of physical closeness. Play hide and seek games with your child to promote the development of object permanence and the understanding that even when you can't see each other, you continue to be connected. Read books about separation such as the Invisible string and The Kissing Hand. Gradually challenge your child to separate from you at home in a playful and engaging way. Designing a playful goodbye ritual, singing a goodbye song and consistently practicing prior to a potentially more stressful separation times can help your child be more available to engaging in them when the time comes to say goodbye!



If your child exhibits significant distress about separation or school, you might want to consider additional support for you and/or your child. One highly effective, evidence-based treatment we offer parents at Growing Minds is SPACE (Supportive Parenting for Anxious Childhood Emotions). For additional information about our SPACE treatment program, see below in the resources section.



### ***Plan meals:***

if your child is a highly picky eater or appears to be nervous about their meal choices in school, try to provide as much accurate information from the school about the different options for snack and lunch as well as the meal schedule. Share the information with your child in a way that is clear and predictable based on their age and developmental levels. Collaborate with your child on creating a list of their favorite snacks, going to the grocery store, and preparing their snack/lunch plans.

### ***Promote toileting wellness:***

Research indicates a direct connection between gut health and mental health. Challenges with digestion can lead to heightened anxiety and mood challenge and vice versa. Monitor your child's daily elimination and notice if there are any signs of constipation. Provide a diet that is high in fiber ("poop friendly diet") and high water intake. Talk with your child's teacher, school counselor and/or nurse. If your child requires additional support around toileting during the school day to ensure that your child feels comfortable using the bathroom.

### ***Plan for school transportation:***

For many children the arrival to and from school can include new transportation modes. Practice walking/driving/taking the bus to school by taking that route a number of times prior to the first day of school, drawing maps and providing toys that can help your child develop a sense of mastery through play (for example a toy school bus).

### ***Identify sensory needs:***

If you notice or know that your child is highly sensitive to sensory stimulation such as sounds, touch, smell and taste, work with your child to identify possible challenges and helpful tools that they can use during the school day. Sensory sensitivity can be expressed by both sensory seeking and sensory avoidance behaviors. If your child appears to be highly sensitive to loud sounds, you might want to try using headphones at times that can be expected to be especially loud (such as during lunch and dismissal). If your child appears to be seeking sensory input, create a list of items that can provide such input and could be safely used in school (for example a squishy ball, or a pop it fidgets). If you think your child has significant sensory sensitivities, an Occupational Therapy evaluation could be helpful for identifying and addressing their sensory needs.

### ***Familiarize a new Setting:***

Starting a new school, a new classroom or moving to a different building can all be transitions that can add to your child's nervousness during this transition. Seek information that you can share with your child about the new setting, look at pictures and websites, draw pictures, take tours with your child and for younger children provide opportunities play using age-appropriate toys such as school houses. If possible, arrange a visit to the school before the start of the year. Familiarize your child with the classrooms, teachers, and other important areas.



## *Reconnect with school friends:*

Arrange playdates or get-togethers with your child's school friends to help rekindle those connections before the start of the school year. These connections foster a sense of comfort and belonging. (Think about going to a gathering with a friend vs going to a gathering where you don't know anyone yet.) After school begins, plan play dates for your little ones, and encourage your elementary to middle schoolers to get together with peers from their class to form new relationships.

## *Model a positive attitude and a growth mindset:*

As a parent, maintain a positive attitude and a growth mindset toward the return to school. Demonstrate enthusiasm for learning and encourage your child to embrace new experiences, take on new challenges and explore their curiosity, creativity and problem solving abilities.



Remember that every child is unique, and some may require more time and support to adjust to the back-to-school transition. By being proactive and intentional in your support, you can help your child feel confident and prepared for the upcoming school year and reduce the need for more reactive strategies later on. Make sure to take good care of yourself and your own feelings about this transition as it can be an opportunity to express messages of strengths and faith in your child's capabilities as well as highlight the importance of self-care and model the use of coping skills. Seek support from family, friends and professionals if you feel that you or your child are struggling prior to or during this transition.



# Resources

## *Anxiety*

- [SPACE \(Supportive Parenting for Anxious Childhood Emotions\) - https://www.spacetreatment.net](https://www.spacetreatment.net)
- [SPACE Information Session with Growing Minds](#)
- [SPACE Registration](#)

## *Media Use*

- [Dear Parents: A Digital Well-Being Resource from Teens to Parents Article](#)
- [Essential videos for Screen Smart Families](#)
- [Growing Minds' Family Screen Time](#)

## *Back to School Books*

- [Back to School Books](#)

## *Back to School Toys*

- [Playmobil Take Along School House Playset](#)
- [Playmobil School Bus](#)
- [CORPER TOYS School Bus Toy with Sounds and Lights for Kids](#)
- [Melissa & Doug School Bus Wooden Play Set](#)
- [Kids Dollhouse Toy Playset, Girls Pretend Play Doll House School Set W/ Portable Backpack and Accessories](#)

