

SCPA'S BACK TO SCHOOL NEWSLETTER

Message from
Mary DiBenedetto, Ph.D.
Chair, School Psychology Committee



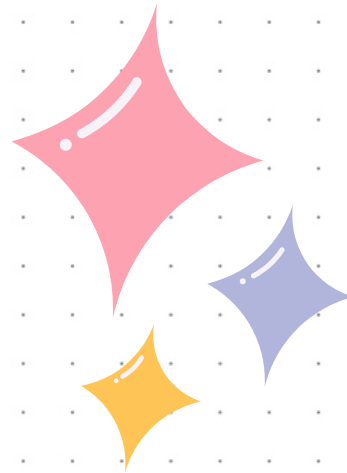
As summer winds down, families often experience a mix of excitement and nervousness about the start of a new school year. Returning to school means adjusting to new teachers, classmates, routines, and expectations, which can feel overwhelming.

The good news is that children are remarkably resilient!

With a little preparation and support, you can help make the transition smoother. The National Association of School Psychologists and the American Psychological Association note that preparing children for the new school year can help reduce back-to-school anxiety.

REMEMBER:

Check in with your own emotions before your child heads back to school. Children often take cues from their parents on how to respond to stress, so staying calm, confident, and reassuring will help your child feel more secure, and better able to manage their own anxiety.



SCPA'S BACK TO SCHOOL-2



ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Age Group:

- Elementary-aged children are still learning how to manage change and separation, so returning to school can bring a mix of excitement and nervousness. While every child adjusts at their own pace, younger kids often benefit from extra guidance, reassurance, and routine. The following tips can help your child make a smooth and successful transition back to school.

Focus Points:

- Sleep: Moving from a more carefree summertime schedule to the strict regimen of returning to school can feel abrupt. Rather than waiting until the last minute, begin shifting bedtime and wake-up time approximately three weeks before school begins. Keeping the change to 15-20 minutes every few days allows your child's internal clock to adjust more naturally. Additionally, limiting screen time before bed is a good routine to get into before school.
- Outside Time: Spending time outside, particularly in the morning, helps expose your child to natural light and helps regulate their circadian rhythm, which aides in overall sleep hygiene.
- Routine: Start to review your child's morning routine with them prior to the first day of school. Visual reminders, such as using dry erase calendars or AM and PM checklists, are always helpful.
- Build Independence: It's never too early to provide ways for your child to become more independent. Even preschoolers can benefit from practicing putting on their backpacks, using the bathroom independently, and opening their lunch containers. Elementary aged children can begin to pack their own backpacks and check off some simple AM visual lists, including items such as "do I have my homework in my backpack?" This builds confidence.
- Try this: Play the "Feelings Detective" activity
<https://sesameworkshop.org/resources/lets-play-a-game-feelings-detective/>



SCPA'S BACK TO SCHOOL-3



MIDDLE SCHOOL

Age Group:

- It is quite normal for pre-teens and teens to begin to separate a bit more from their parents, as seen in their limited conversation, openness, or perhaps general “moodiness.” Even with those roadblocks, it is very important to continue to check in with your children to see how they are adjusting to the return to school. Helping them prepare with good habits will help this process. Asking open-ended questions, perhaps while driving in the car, or eating, or playing a game, may be a positive way to do a check in with your teen.

Focus Points:

- **Build Independence:** With middle school comes more independence. This may include maintaining their schedules, keeping track of their work in an agenda book, and managing long-term assignments. Depending on each child's level of autonomy, they would also benefit from utilizing visuals to provide reminders and help with organization, while still retaining their independence. They may become more opinionated about specific school supplies they would like to purchase, which can aid in building their independence and sense of control over returning to school.
- **Sleep:** Since middle and high schools often start earlier, begin adjusting bedtimes and wake-up times a few weeks before school starts. Establishing healthy habits, like limiting screen time before bed, can also improve sleep and make the transition back to school much smoother. (see below)
- **Technology Re-set:** Establishing family rules regarding phone usage - turn-off time - also includes charging their phones and Chromebook outside of their bedroom. It is also important to discuss healthy social media habits with your child.
- **Practice and Review:** Preparation is key to a smooth transition. Visit the school, walk through your child's schedule, practice the route to their classes, and, if applicable, practice opening their locker. Familiarity builds confidence and helps reduce first-day anxiety.
- **Try These:** “Highs, Lows & Interesting” family conversation, where each person presents one “high,” “low,” and “interesting” part of their day. This can happen during dinner or in the car.



SCPA'S BACK TO SCHOOL-4

HIGH SCHOOL

Age Group:

- Many of the same strategies that support middle school students also benefit high schoolers. As teens become more independent and navigate the emotional ups and downs of adolescence, your support remains essential.

Focus Points:

- **Sleep:** High school brings greater independence, but that doesn't make sleep any less important. In fact, consistent, adequate sleep continues to play a vital role in your teen's mood, learning, and overall well-being. Begin adjusting bedtime and wake-up schedules a few weeks before school starts to help make the transition smoother.
- **Technology:** The American Academy of Pediatrics and sleep researchers also recommend creating a technology-free bedtime routine. As challenging as this may be, limiting your teen's screen time at least one hour before bed is a good routine to get into before returning to school; also try creating a technology-free bedtime routine. Research has consistently shown that having phones, computers, or other electronic devices in a teen's bedroom overnight can negatively impact sleep. The light emitted from screens, along with notifications and the temptation to stay connected, can delay sleep onset and reduce overall sleep quality.
- **Communication:** Your teen may not always seem eager to talk, but they still benefit from regular check-ins. Create opportunities to connect in a relaxed, nonjudgmental setting and encourage conversations about their thoughts and feelings regarding the upcoming school year.

TAKE AWAY...

- It is typical to have back to school jitters, including a nervous stomach and temporary worries.
- Just remember to seek mental health support if your child's anxiety lasts for weeks, causes any school refusal (including physical complaints), or interferes with their daily life. Contact your child's School Psychologist or School Social Worker if you have any concerns or questions.

