

# 5 Tips for a Smooth Transition and Start to the New School Year for the Whole Family

by Mallory Band, M.Ed., Special Educator and Executive Function Specialist

Transitions are hard; there is no denying that, but they don't have to be miserable. Once the school year ends, routines and structure tend to fly out of the window. Less helpful and productive habits may inch closer than we'd like for ourselves and our children. We are humans, so this is to be expected. Now that the start of the new school year is in sight, it's important we intentionally set our family units up for success as new changes and responsibilities are on the horizon. Transitions bring forth a disruption in routine and a great sense of uncertainty for many of us. Rather than waiting for challenges to come up, let's approach this new school year with a proactive approach.

There is no magic formula or solution to preventing chaos from ensuing, but there are five tangible strategies that we can implement into our family's daily lives to help facilitate a smooth transition to the start of the new school year. Let's explore what they are and how we can successfully implement them with buy-in from the entire family!

## 1. Map out and rehearse routines before the first day of school

If fail to prepare, prepare to fail. I am a huge believer in preparing and practicing when the stakes and stress are lower to build competence, confidence, and a greater sense of independence. Don't wait until the day before school starts to try and create 15 new routines with and for your family. This will overwhelm everyone, yourself included, and certainly won't be as successful as we'd like. Instead, two or three weeks before school starts, sit down with your family or children, individually, if needed, and figure out one specific routine that is the priority. If you are having a hard time determining which routine to start with, consider the following questions:

- Which routine seemed to be the most challenging last school year?
- Where did the most tension arise amongst the family unit (before school, after school, before bed?)
- In which part of the family routine could you use more support?

These questions should help you pinpoint the most foundational time/area with which to begin. Work with your family or child to map out incremental time blocks and work backwards from when you need to get out of the door or should be asleep to the first step to begin this process of the routine. This should be child-led (depending on their age). Creating a visual checklist, no matter their age, can be a useful frame of reference to build independence and autonomy.

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If you decide on focusing on the morning routine, do time trials the week before school starts where everyone is physically moving through their morning routine checklist. There will be kinks to be ironed out and this is ok; therefore, we want to get some of these frustrations and jitters out when the stakes are lower. Instead of getting in the car and driving to school being the last step, get everyone in the car and drive to breakfast or a fun outdoor activity to simulate the completion of that routine.

## 2. Establish what help and scaffolding looks like with and for your child

As parents and guardians, we do our best to give our children what we think they need. Much of the time, we are successful at this, but there are certainly times when we offer what works for us rather than what they may need in that moment. Homework help can often be a slog and create tension and frustration amongst the entire family unit. To prepare proactively, sit down with each child, individually, and determine, what does help and scaffolding look like for them. What do they want or not want in terms of homework support?

If the end goal is for our children to complete and submit their homework nightly, what do they need from us to do so consistently and with as little tension as possible? Maybe your daughter needs you to sit with her for the first 10 minutes each night to help her get started and then you can peel away, while your son may need a reminder to get started but can't work with you "hovering" on top of him. Maybe your child benefits from a 5-minute check in at the end of the night ensuring all assignments were completed and turned in. What works for one child may not work for the other. This exercise will give you clear guidance in what your child needs from you, while encouraging them to think introspectively and metacognitively, building their self-awareness and advocacy skills.

## 3. Create check-in meetings with your child

Once the school year begins, sports practices and games kick off, and social events get planned weekly, there is not a ton of sporadic free time for communication and planning within the family unit. To get ahead of things veering off course, predetermine a weekly time and day where you and your child can consistently check in and meet for 5-10 minutes. The purpose of this weekly check-in is to get the scoop of how they are doing emotionally, academically, and socially. Instead of nagging them or asking questions and continuously receiving one-word answers, having a pre-selected set of talking points is crucial.

Here is an example of what this could look like (these are questions my students and I have generated together, and they use as they lead their weekly parent-check-ins):

### **Sundays @ 5pm Talking Points:**

- A highlight from my week.
- A challenge from my week.
- What missing assignments do I have?
- What is my plan for getting these assignments completed?
- What is my current week looking like (homework, sports, extracurriculars)?

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- What upcoming work is on my radar? (long-term projects, papers, tests, quizzes).
- Any teacher or coach meetings I have scheduled/need to schedule.

As the parent in these exercises, it is important to listen actively and let your child talk and work through their notes/talking points. Refrain from interrupting or interjecting, even if you have questions or don't agree with their plan. By encouraging our children to take the lead, they are building ownership and autonomy over their work and responsibilities, which, in turn, will create greater buy-in from them.

#### 4. **Reach out to your child's teachers in the first few weeks and share any thoughts/concerns to get on their radar**

Don't wait until something unpleasant or frustrating happens to reach out to your child's teacher or support team. Be proactive. Consider stopping by during orientation or one day after school to introduce yourself. You may have concerns to share that have consistently been on your radar each year (challenges with reading comprehension or behavioral issues), while on the other hand, you may not have any concerns now. This is okay. Especially during the first six weeks of school, teachers are incredibly busy trying to establish routines, rules, and expectations, so they may not have the time to communicate as regularly with families as they would like.

If chatting with your child's teacher in person isn't an option, send a welcome email to their teacher(s), counselors, etc. Introduce yourself, share what support was helpful and successful last year, and any concerns or questions you may have. If your child has an IEP, 504 plan, or learning plan, reach out to their team early and often and get meetings on the calendar, because before you know it, the first two months have passed by, and you still haven't been able to touch base with your child's team.

You are your child's biggest and best advocate. You have the right to express your concerns and ask as many questions as you have.

#### 5. **Create a visual aid / word bank to promote effective communication**

When our schedules pick up, life gets busy and overwhelming, which can often lead to poorer and less effective communication within our family unit. Instead of waiting for these events to occur and then trying desperately to make repairs, let's remember to be intentional and proactive. As a family, create a list of mutually agreed upon ways/forms of effective communication that is expected from all family members, especially to be modeled by you, the adult!

You all can collaborate to create a family contract that each member agrees to and will sign. We will ALL make mistakes, mess up, and break the contract from time to time, but this is what is going to hold us accountable.

Here is an example of what a family communication contract might look like:

- We will use "I feel" statements, rather than you did... (blaming language).

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- We will ask for what we need.
- We will hold the benefit of the doubt for each family member.
- If we are becoming angry, emotional, or frustrated, it is encouraged to say, “I can’t have this conversation now. I need to take a break and will come back in 20 minutes.”
- I will speak my truth without cursing or intentionally trying to harm or hurt someone else.
- When we hurt someone, we are responsible for repairing the situation.

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This won't be 100 percent effective all the time but creating a clear set of positive guidelines and expectations will provide boundaries for each individual.

Transitions are challenging. Children may not want to go back to school. They may be feeling worried, frustrated, scared, or anything else about the upcoming transition, which is filled with uncertainty. Validate their feelings and remind them that they can do hard things. They are not alone.

As the new school year approaches, remember the following:

- Consistency and predictability are key.
- Do the hard thing now to help your future family, rather than what is easy in the moment for a short-term sense of relief.
- See your child and meet them where they are.
- Encourage every family member to make their choices and mistakes.
- Speak up for your child; you are their biggest advocate.

When all else fails, remember one thing: **Take things one day at a time, one hour at a time, one minute at a time.**

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