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Preparing for the new school year together: How parent-child interaction can help them thrive

The summer holidays: a time that brings six weeks of joy to many children, and six weeks of racing to arrange childcare for many parents, but one common ground – that the child will be going back to school at the end it. For the child, this can often mean: new surroundings as they change classroom; new challenges as the schoolwork increases in difficulty; and depending on the circumstances, sometimes even new peer groups. Therefore, it is crucial that preparations are in place to ensure the child can make the best start possible. These preparations can start at home, as this article focuses on *eight key ways* that parents and children can interact to get the child both physically and mentally ready to start the new year.

1. Finding a good sleep routine.

During the summer, a child's sleep routine may become more relaxed, as they won't need to be up early for school. Though a lie-in may sound favourable to all involved, it is important to ensure that the child eases back into a good sleep routine, ready to go back to school, as sleep problems are associated with poor school adjustment[1]. This includes getting to bed a little earlier, and getting up earlier, to mimic a school routine. It may also be worth having parent-child discussions about how the child is sleeping, as a recent study suggested 40% of parents weren't aware of child-reported difficulties with sleep quality, sleep onset latency, or night waking's[2]. Such sleep outcomes have been adversely associated with screen time, particularly during bedtime hours[3]. Point two explores how screen time can be optimised to minimise the potential harm that it can have on sleep and well-being.

2. Optimising screen time.

Children's screen time has increased dramatically, as technology continues to develop. However, this doesn't have to be a problem, as when used in a thoughtful and responsible way, this can have a positive impact on language[4] and literacy development[5]. Still, children may want to engage in sedentary screen-based activities, such as watching TV, so it is important that mediation strategies are co-constructed by parents and children to agree on a plan that works for them both[6]. This may include pre-determining the lengths of active screen time for learning purposes and passive screen time for entertainment purposes, as well as when screen time is allowed, to limit the health and developmental risks associated with excessive screen time[7].

3. Participating in physical activity.

The school holidays are an excellent opportunity for a child to participate in physical activity, yet such engagement is influenced by a parent's support and encouragement to do so[8]. A parent has the potential to provide a role model that positions physical activity in a fun and positive light. This is important because the benefits of participation in physical activity are well-documented at a physical, psychological, and social level[9,10,11]. Moreover, positive experiences of physical activity outside of school also encourage participation in physical education during school[12], which is linked to improved academic achievement[13], and the development of lifelong physical activity habits[14].

4. Encouraging healthy eating.

Healthy eating is linked to improvements in academic performance, behaviour at school, and mental health[15]. However, when eating at school, the child tends to decide what they eat. This doesn't have to lead to unhealthy food choices though, as children acknowledge how people around them influence their food choices and they typically mimic their parents' choices[16]. As such, encouraging healthy eating during the school holidays with foods the child likes, could help to develop healthy eating habits at school, be this acceptance of healthy packed lunches or healthy school dinner choices.

5. Simulating the rhythm of a typical school day.

It is important for a child to re-familiarise themselves with a typical school day. This brings together points 1-4, including the regulation of sleep schedules, optimising screen time, participating in physical activity, and healthy eating around the same time they would at school. Parent-child interaction to agree on how this is implemented will not only be beneficial for preparing the child to go back to school, but adherence to this 'structured day' approach regulates obesogenic behaviours, meaning the child will also experience health benefits in the process[17].

6. Choosing their own school supplies.

Though this appears to suggest adhering to the common demand, "I want that one", in the case of purchasing school supplies, such as backpacks, shoes, and lunchboxes, allowing the child to choose ones that they like could give them a sense of excitement and responsibility. However, it is also important that the parent – where feasible - supports their choices, as coherence between parents, peers, and the child's own desires towards products, such as school supplies can positively influence the child's self-esteem[18]. This is crucial considering these are items the child will be using every day at school.

7. Establishing a 'productive zone' for homework.

Homework is a common part of day-to-day school life. A child's engagement with homework duties is driven by intrinsic motivation levels, attitudes, time management, and perceived value[19]. These factors can be influenced by parental support, as this can affect the child's ability to manage the task[19]. To promote engagement, parents and children may benefit from co-establishing a 'productive zone', which includes agreeing a place free from distractions, as well as a time that a parent will be available to help. This could make homework appear more manageable, as well as develop a routine that both parent and child feel comfortable maintaining.

8. Being psychologically ready for change.

As mentioned at the start, the new school year often brings with it some notable changes, which the child needs to be prepared for. It is natural for a child to be anxious about starting a new year, as a lot of children will be wondering what their first day is going to be like. The start of a new school year is a good time to get involved, i.e. by taking the bus to school to meet new friends, or starting a new after-school activity. It could be worth speaking with the child to learn what they hope to get out of the new year, so that the parent is well-prepared to encourage and support this[20].

Moreover, by linking points 1-7 into the final point, the child will be in the best position to thrive in the new school year. Ultimately, coming to decisions together will not only reduce conflict and stress in the lead up to going back to school[21], but a strong parent-child relationship also has a significant bearing on a child's psychosocial and socioemotional readiness for the new school year[22].

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