

Fun Fact of the Week

Back-to-school checklist: 5 tips to get in the groove*

It's been a great summer, but it's time to get everyone back in the groove of classes, sports practice - and getting up early again. Here are some tips to help your kids make a healthy transition back to school.



1. Get bedtimes on track and tidy up the sleep hygiene.

In the summer, when it's light after 10 p.m., it's easy for bedtimes to slip. But with early school wake-up calls coming, it's key for children and teens to get to bed so they get enough quality sleep. Pediatricians recommend that children age 6 to 12 get 9 to 12 hours of sleep a night, and that teens get 8 to 10 hours a night. Here are some tips to help children and teens get the sleep they need when they return to school.

- **Power off the devices.** “Good sleep hygiene means all devices should be turned off an hour before bedtime,” says Andrea Hoopes, MD, a Kaiser Permanente Washington pediatrician. “This gives their brains time to unplug from the stimulation and the light from phones and computers.” Reading a book or magazine — the old-school-kind — can help kids relax right before bedtime.
- **Consider darkening shades.** The clock says it's bedtime, but it's still light out. That can interfere with a child's sleep. Darkening shades can block out distracting light and help your child drift off more easily.
- **Ease off caffeine.** Your child or teen should stop drinking anything with caffeine, including sodas and energy drinks, after noon. That way, by bedtime, the stimulant will be out of their system.

2. Get your young athlete a sports exam.

Any student who plays a school sport needs a sports physical, which is more focused than an annual wellness checkup. The sports checkup reviews heart and lung health, including diagnosing any breathing or exertion issues like asthma that could be worsened by playing sports. It also includes a sport-specific examination of a child's muscles and bones.



If your child is due for an annual exam, you can get the sports physical with the pediatrician at the same time. Jane Mellott, MD, a pediatrician with Kaiser Permanente Washington, recommends this approach. “Sometimes the only time we see a child or teenager is for the sports physical,” she says, “so we can use that time to broach other subjects with them, and make sure they are happy and healthy otherwise.”

If your child isn't due for an annual checkup, you can get a sports physical at many walk-in clinics.

3. Check your young student's eyes.

Good vision is critical to children's success in the classroom. That's why Philip Paros, OD, Kaiser Permanente's Physician in Chief and Director of Audiology and Eye Care, says checking your child's eyes before issues interfere with school is so important.

"Children may not complain of not being able to see clearly," says Dr. Paros, "which makes exams even more important." Some signs there could be issues, he says, can include:

- Recurring headaches while reading or using digital devices
- Sitting too close to a TV screen
- Squinting when viewing things in the distance, like a whiteboard or a ball in gym class
- Losing place while reading, or slipping behind in reading ability
- Poor concentration

"Even children with glasses or contacts already may need updated prescriptions," Dr. Paros says. Vision screening can be done at a child's annual well-child exam.

4. Don't take "fine" for an answer.

Depression, anxiety, and stress are big health risks to teens and younger kids. Dr. Mellott says that in her experience kids will rarely say that they are being bullied or that they are experiencing other stressors.



To stay in tune with your child's mood, make sure you engage in real conversations about what's going on at and after school. Instead of asking "How was school?" which practically invites the non-answer "fine," see if you can probe a bit more. Ask about specific classes, what the teachers are like, and if your child has made any new friends this year.

"Kids typically won't volunteer if they are being bullied," Dr. Mellott says, "and the bullies never volunteer." So, if you suspect either scenario, talk with the teachers as soon as you can. Your pediatrician can also help discover mental-health issues for your child as well as prescribe constructive next steps for everyone.

5. Make sure backpacks fit well.

As schoolkids get older, they tend to carry heavier books. A load of books with a laptop can weigh as much as 30 pounds. That can spell shoulder, neck, and back strain for young people, and affect their posture.

Make sure your child's backpack fits well, with padding on the shoulder straps that can be loosened and tightened to ensure a snug fit depending on the contents. Make sure the backpack is always worn with both straps over both shoulders, not one slung over one arm, which adds to the pressure on that arm.

Some parents are switching to rolling backpacks, which can definitely ease the load on young shoulders. "But many schools don't allow them," Dr. Mellott says, "because they can be considered a tripping hazard." Check to make sure your child's school allows them.

Paying attention to the big (and little) issues that face your child heading back to school should help everyone in the family have a happier and healthier year.