

Move over, summer--a new school year is coming!

With the start of school, families face new organization challenges. School bells ring--and so do early-morning alarm clocks. Shorter autumn days bring a hectic round of sports, activities and events, and calendars fill with cryptic notes. Can the holidays be far behind?

Get organized now for the best school year ever! Use these ideas to prepare your home and family for the busy days ahead:

Create Calendar Central

Each school year floats on a sea of schedules. School functions. Lunch menus. Scout meetings and music lessons. What do you do when you're drowning in paper?

Nothing calms school year chaos like Calendar Central: a centralized site for all family calendars and schedules. You'll need a family event calendar to track after-school activities, school programs and volunteer work. Add specialized calendars and schedules, and you have it: a one-stop shop for family time management. Form is less important than function. A paper calendar with large squares lets you enter information easily. Pre-printed white board calendars are easy to revise when necessary. Color-coding entries by family member helps keep busy lives straight.

Planner users dedicate a planner section to serve as Calendar Central, while tech-savvy people store the info in a smart phone and sync with multiple computers. Choose a calendar format that works for your family.

Post the family event calendar in a public place near the telephone. Use magnets to attach the calendar to the refrigerator, or tack it to a bulletin board.

Add other calendars to Calendar Central: school lunch menus, class assignment sheets, sports practice schedules. When the room mother calls for field trip volunteers, you'll know at a glance whether you're free to join the group on the bus that day.

Ease the family into a school year schedule.

The first day of school is no time for a drastic adjustment of household sleep schedules. Instead, ease children back into a school year routine gradually.

During the last two weeks of summer, re-introduce a school year bedtime. Begin waking late sleepers earlier and earlier, closer to the hour they'll need to rise when school begins.

Don't neglect mealtimes! Younger children, in particular, need to adapt to new meal routines before the school day demands it of them. Plan meals and snacks to accustom little ones to rituals of the school day before the school year begins.

Check before you shop

August is the second-biggest sales month for clothing retailers. Back to school clothing sales begin as early as July! Are you prepared to run the school clothes gauntlet?

An informed shopper is a savvy shopper, so prepare before you shop. Take an afternoon and assess each child's clothing needs. Empty drawers and closets of outgrown or worn-out clothing, and either store or donate the discards.

Working with your child, clean and organize clothing storage before new garments are added--and cut down on school morning calls of "Mom! I don't have any clean . . ."

Develop a wardrobe needs list for each child. Check for possible hand-me-downs from older siblings as you make your list. If you discuss the needs list and the family budget with your children before you shop, you'll avoid in-the-store tantrums.

Similarly, ask the school for classroom supply lists before shopping for school supplies. Forewarned is forearmed ... and helps protect the family budget.

Do shop early! With back-to-school sales beginning in mid-July, tardy shoppers have a tough time locating needed supplies among September's Halloween costumes and Christmas decorations.

Gather your papers

School entry may require documentation from immunization records to report cards from the previous school year. A little preparation can prevent frantic last-minute searches.

Call your child's school beforehand to find out what paperwork will be required--then find it! You won't be sorry come registration day.

Take aim on morning madness

How are school mornings in your home? Crazy and chaotic, or calm and cheerful? Plan ahead to send your schoolchildren out the door in a happy mood.

Each evening, think ahead to the following morning. Set the breakfast table as you clear the dinner dishes.

Lay out children's clothing the night before.

Multi-child households may need a bathroom schedule so that everyone gets equal time before the mirror.

What do you do about books and papers, lunch money and permission slips? Practice the Launch Pad concept! A dedicated space for every family member, a Launch Pad gets the family out the door in record time--and organized.

Spiff up household systems

A new school year quickens the tempo of family life. Sports activities, music lessons, church programs and volunteer commitments tap parental time and put new mileage on the mini-van.

Get organized! Spiff up your household systems to meet autumn's faster pace"

- Take a stab at speed cleaning and whip through household chores in record time.
- Cut time in the kitchen: create a menu plan and never again wonder "What's for dinner?"
- Try a session of freezer cooking and stock the freezer with prepared meals for stress-free dinners on sports nights

Happy New School Year! Time to swing into a new school year--from an organized home.