

Back to School!

8 Great Guidelines for a Splendid School Year



8 Guidelines to help you set up your school
year for success!

From Amy Johnson, MSW


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Personal Parent Coach

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8 Great Guidelines for a Splendid School Year

Back to School. For many parents, these words fill them with relief. Finally! Back to a routine! Child care worries are lessened. Children will have constructive things to do!



Others are filled with stress and dread. What about my child who doesn't transition easily? Who had a rough year academically last year? Who struggles with social skills? Who has special needs?

This guide is filled with guidelines gleaned from years of experience as a School Social Worker, Parent Coach, Parent Education Instructor, and as a parent myself. Taking some time to think ahead about the transitions to come, make a plan, and get your resources lined up can make a world of difference when challenges crop us, as they inevitably do.

I encourage you to modify these ideas to fit your family, your child, and your personal situation. There is no “one way fits all” in parenting, and my hope is that these tips will help this school year be a great one for you and your family!





GREAT GUIDELINE #1

SLEEP IS SUPER IMPORTANT!

Research shows that sleep is of paramount importance to learning. A recent study by Dr. Avi Sadeh of Tel Aviv University showed that children who got as little as one hour less sleep per night showed a significant loss of learning ability.

In fact, “The performance gap caused by an hour’s difference in sleep was bigger than the normal gap between a fourth-grader and a sixth-grader.... ‘A loss of one hour of sleep is equivalent to [the loss of] two years of cognitive maturation and development,’ Sadeh explains.”

[<http://nymag.com/news/features/38951/index1.html>]

Another study of high school students showed a dramatic impact on grades:

Dr. Kyla Wahlstrom of the University of Minnesota surveyed more than 7,000 high schoolers in Minnesota about their sleep habits and grades. Teens who received A’s averaged about fifteen more minutes sleep than the B students, who in turn averaged eleven more minutes than the C’s, and the C’s had ten more minutes than the D’s....Every fifteen minutes counts.

[<http://nymag.com/news/features/38951/index1.html>]

On the next page, you’ll find a chart from webmd.com about how much sleep children need at different ages.



How Much Sleep Do Children Need?

The amount of sleep a child needs varies depending on the individual and certain factors, including the age of the child. Following are some general guidelines:

1-4 Weeks Old:

15 - 16 hours per day

1-4 Months Old:

14 - 15 hours per day

4-12 Months Old:

14 - 15 hours per day

1-3 Years Old:

12 - 14 hours per day

3-6 Years Old:

10 - 12 hours per day

7-12 Years Old:

10 - 11 hours per day

12-18 Years Old:

8 - 9 hours per day

For more information on each of these stages, variations that can occur, and why sleep is important, go to <http://www.webmd.com/parenting/guide/sleep-children>.



GREAT GUIDELINE #2

DON'T SAY "HAVE FUN!" AS YOUR MORNING SEND OFF.

School may be fun some of the time, but other times, school is work. If we tell our children to "have fun" every day, they may expect to be entertained at school all of the time.

While good teachers use a variety of methods to reach the different learning styles and abilities of the students in their classrooms, there are times when students need to work hard, and it may not be fun.

Depending on your child's innate abilities, their skill level and interests, and their connection with their teacher, he or she may find different parts of their school day fun. Your child may enjoy reading, art, science, or recess more than another time of day.

Think about this. As children grow, school becomes more demanding. If all high school and college students were showing up to "have fun," how much important learning can be lost? How will this affect these students' attitudes toward working when they enter the workplace? Even if they have a job they love, there will be times when they need to do work that isn't "fun."

Another option is to say something like, "Be kind today, and make smart choices." Then you can ask your child at the end of the day how he or she was kind, what a smart choice is she or he made that day, and if you really want to, you can ask at that time, "Did you do anything that was fun?"



GREAT GUIDELINE #3

RULES AND RESPECT

One of the many things students learn when they go to school is that rules can be different in different places. The rules in their classroom may differ from ones they must adhere to at home. The rules in the cafeteria may be different from the school playground, and the rules in the gym will certainly be different from those in the library.

This is an important skill for children to learn. While general rules, like respect and nonviolence can transcend location, other rules vary. Children need to learn to respect and follow the rules in the place where they are, whether it is at home, at school, at a friend's home, at church, at a sporting event or another extracurricular club.

If your child is having difficulty in this area, talk to him or her. Ask which rules are different in some of the areas mentioned above. Ask them if they are harder or easier to follow in one place than another. Find out if he or she is uncomfortable with a certain rule, and explore why that may be. You can also play a game where you ask your child what rules he or she would make if she or he were king or queen. Then follow their logic. "What might happen if everyone to the people who want to read if everyone could dance and sing in the library?" "How would the children learn if the teacher couldn't talk?"

Especially during the elementary years, learning about different rules and when and how to disagree is part of the child's developmental job. You can help them learn respectful ways to follow and challenge rules. By doing so, you will give them a skill they can use well into adulthood.



GREAT GUIDELINE #4

ESTABLISH ROUTINES

Establishing a few routines can seem like a lot of upfront work. However, if you stick with it and keep them fairly simple, routines can make transitions around the house run much smoother during hectic mornings and afternoons.

First, do as much as you possibly can the night before. Help your child get in the habit of choosing what he or she will wear the night before, and laying it out.

Have your child bathe or shower at night, and gather everything he or she needs for the next day before going to bed. Designate a spot for things that need to go to school, and get it all there the night before. If your child brings lunch, prepare as much of that as possible the night before, too.

Also designate a spot for where stuff goes when it comes into your home in the afternoon. Do you have a place for backpacks? Help your child learn to clean out his or her lunchbox and put it where it's ready to be refilled. Create a place for papers that need to be looked at or signed by you.

Create a homework station, away from distractions and stocked with things your child might need: pens and pencils, erasers, a calculator, hole punch, extra paper, etc. If you want, this can be a mobile supply caddy that can go different places. However, having a spot where your child does his or her homework everyday can help them focus more.

And finally, designate a time that is for homework every day. This may vary depending on sport or club schedules; however, it is important students learn to allot time for their homework, away from cell phones and other distractions.

Again, this is a great life skill!



GREAT GUIDELINE #5

BEWARE OF OVERSCHEDULING

Today's children are often overscheduled, creating stress for both parents and students. It's important for parents to discern which activities they are signing up their children for and why. With older children and teens, allowing choice is great, but helping them to understand what is a reasonable amount to take on is equally important.

With young children, remember that their work is play. Directing it too much can impinge on their creativity. Some cities are even moving to more creative playground options, where the children actually build the play structure themselves with a kit of foam blocks and other materials (see: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2007398,00.html>). Providing opportunities for this type of play encourages problem-solving, cooperation, assertiveness, and creativity.

Older children and teens need down time, too. Boredom for them is often a precursor to coming up with a creative idea. Too much down time and too much boredom can lead to poor choices and poor use of impulsivity, but allowing some unstructured time for most children and teens is not a bad thing.

Important questions for parents to ask are:

- Does this activity support the values we adhere to in our family?
- Are there opportunities for growth, skills, and friendships that will benefit my child?
- Do I want my child to do this because he or she would enjoy it or grow from it, or because I am trying to look like a "great parent"? Is it truly for my child or is it for my need to look good? (continued next page)



- Does my child have the time and energy to do this activity well and participate to the level expected? Do I?
- Am I trying to do the same thing for each child, when they may have different temperaments and needs?
- What is the worse thing that could happen if we choose not to continue this activity? What's the best thing that could happen?

If you are unsure whether your child is involved in too many activities, check out these warning signs from scholastic.com:

- Does he act grouchy, mopey, or irritable?
- Can she fall asleep at bedtime?
- Are his grades slipping? Does he finish his homework?
- Has she started overeating?
- Does he zone out in front of the TV?
- Is she complaining of stomachaches, headaches, or mysterious illnesses?
- Does he grumble about being bored?
- Is she over-anxious about getting approval from authority figures?
- When you're heading out the door, does he throw a tantrum or "lose" equipment?
- Does she pick fights with her siblings or complain you don't love her as much?
- Can he keep track of where he's supposed to be?
- Is her schedule draining you or your family members?

If your child exhibits a few or more of these on a regular basis, it may be time to consider cutting back.



GREAT GUIDELINE #6

DAILY DEBRIEF

Take some time each day to debrief with your child about his or her day. Avoid saying, “So, how was your day?” if you routinely get a one word answer, like “Good” or “OK.”

Instead, try some open ended questions like these:

- What was the best thing that happened to you today?
- What was the worse thing that happened to you today?
- What was the funniest thing that happened to you today?
- Who did you sit by at lunch?
- With whom did you play at recess? What did you do?
- Which subject was the most interesting today? What interested you about it?
- What is one way in which you were kind to someone today?
- What’s one really great choice you made today?
- How were you helpful/respectful/honest/hardworking today?
- What’s one thing you did really well?
- What’s one thing you wish you would have done differently?
- How could you do that differently in the future?

Be willing to answer the question yourself, too, if your child asks. You can also check into some games that are available for conversation starters. Use them in the car or at the dinner table. Give everyone a chance to participate, and watch your connections with each other grow.



GREAT GUIDELINE #7

VISIT EARLY AND OFTEN

Parent involvement in school is one of the key factors in your child's success. Whether you are able to volunteer in the classroom, chaperone field trips, or offer to make calls or do projects on your own time, get in touch with your child's teacher and offer to help.

In addition, if at all possible, visit the school and your child's teacher prior to the first day. This is especially important if it is a new school—either because you've moved or been moved, or because your child is transitioning to a new level, such to elementary school from preschool, or to middle school or high school. Simply seeing the school, walking around, and talking to a few friendly people can make a big difference in your child's transition.

If you are able to meet with the teacher, be as supportive as possible, and also advocate for your child, with some statements like, "I'm sure you will figure this out anyway, but I wanted to let you know my child seems to learn best when she can both see and hear instructions" or "One thing his teacher last year found really worked well with him was to make sure he had a warning before transitioning to a new activity."

Avoid being negative, demanding, or hovering too much. Remember that the teacher has his or her hands full with a classroom of students, regulations, and other activities.

Join your parent teacher association and attend the meetings. Get involved in any way you can to help make your child's school a great place for all children.



GREAT GUIDELINE #8

ADVOCATE, ADVOCATE, ADVOCATE

If your child has special needs, and is part of the special education system, then you are probably familiar with meeting with school team members at least yearly to review your child's progress and create new goals. Advocate for your child as much as possible. Be sure to share new information from home, the pediatrician, or other professionals working with your child in order to give the educators as complete a picture as possible.

If you need help, consider contacting a parent advocacy agency, such as PAVE (in Washington State—www.wapave.org) Many states have advocacy organizations for parents of children with different disabilities. Some will even attend school meetings with you to make sure your child is getting all the services to which he or she is entitled.

Most of all, trust your intuition. If you believe your child is having trouble learning, continue talking to professionals in order to find out what might be the culprit.

Here are some people to consider consulting:

- Your child's teacher
- Your pediatrician
- The School Counselor or School Social Worker
- The School Nurse
- Other adults who spend time with your child (scoutmaster, dance instructor, etc)
- Parent advocacy agencies

You know your child, and if something is off, keep looking until you get the answers you need.



So there you have them: **8 Great Guidelines for a Splendid School Year.**

Here's wishing you a spectacular September!

Just one more thing: remember that I'm available for individual help with your challenging parenting situations. Or check out my current offerings on the next page to see what fits for you. And as always, I appreciate your referrals!

Warmly,



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Amy Johnson is a Personal Parent Coach, who works with parents individually, as well as in groups, classes, and workshops. She is co-author of the book, Parenting by Strengths, and is passionate about parenting, and sexuality education. She facilitates classes for teens in her community, and writes "Sex in the Suburbs" in the Federal Way Mirror, to help parents and others think intentionally about sexuality issues.



Personal Parent Coaching

CURRENT OFFERINGS

Parent Group presentations:

- **Safety and Beyond: Discussions for Parents, Caregivers, and Children (Teens) about Growing Up (Coming of Age) in a Sexual Society**
- **How Much Is Enough?** Learn about raising responsible children in an age of overindulgence—be healthy, not hovering!

Contact Amy about pricing and availability for your parent group

Teleclass/Coaching Package: “Rock Star Parenting: Improve Your Relationship with Your Teen” Offered periodically.

Includes Two Individual Coaching Sessions, plus 5 group teleclasses, plus materials and bonus items

Call Amy today to set up a class with a few of your friends!

Individual Coaching Packages: Several options available. See www.diligentjoy.com for options. Custom packages also available.

Parent Classes and Workshops: With as few as 5 attendees, Amy will come to your home or other location to provide a workshop or class of your choice. Options include:

- **How Much Is Enough?** Exploring the balance of love and limits and overindulgence in our culture.
- **The Parenting Highway:** How to stay on track with parenting, rules, negotiations, and more. Includes adjustments for developmental age, ability, temperament and family circumstances
- **Sibling challenges:** communication, when to step in and when not to, and more
- **How to talk about s-e-x with your child or teen:** What to say when, safety, media issues, and more.

If there's something you'd like a workshop on and don't see it here, call Amy to hear what she has to say about your topic of choice!