9 Back to School Behavior Tips: How to Set Up a Structure That Works

By Janet Lehman, MSW

It’s that time again—all around us, TV ads and store posters depict happy children and teens in back–to–school mode. But if the thought of your child starting school fills you with dread, you’re not alone. Right now, thousands of parents across the country are asking themselves, “How am I going to get my child up on time, get him to do his homework and make sure he stays out of trouble this year?” Janet Lehman, MSW tells you how to establish structure in your house before the school year starts—and what to do if you haven’t.

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Why is it so hard for parents and kids to get back in the groove again when the school year rolls around? The answer is simple: summer is different. There is less structure and more freedom. Maybe your ten–year–old son went to day camp or participated in a summer sports program. Or maybe your teenage daughter had a part–time job that she really enjoyed, but she didn’t have other responsibilities. The bottom line is that summer is usually a lot less demanding than the school year for kids and parents alike.

If your child did not have a good experience in school last year, at the start of the summer you might have had great plans for all the things you were going to do; things like sticking to a routine, getting him out of bed at a decent hour and making sure your child kept up with math and reading during vacation. But perhaps you, like many parents, were not able to fulfill all—or even some—of these goals. Even if you were able to make a few changes, it’s natural to start school with the fear that it’s going to be “just like last year.” Unfortunately, some kids have trouble readjusting to school every year. If your child is like this, you can probably already see those tantrums and angry outbursts coming.

If you’ve fallen into a lack of routine over the summer, how can you re–introduce one? And how do you go about establishing a structure that works? Here are a few suggestions for families to try before the school year begins. (In a moment, I’ll tell you what to do if your child has already started school and you’re “feeling the pain” now.)

Before the School Year Begins

Call a Family Meeting and Talk about What’s Going to Change

My husband, James, always said, “Hope without a plan is pointless.” You can hope the school year will be different, but without a plan, it won’t be. That’s why I think it’s really helpful to sit down as a family and have a meeting to talk about the new school year structure. Talk about what rules you’re going to have to change.

If you decide to have a family meeting, I recommend that you really plan out what that meeting will look like ahead of time. Ask yourself what you expect from your kids at the meeting and what you expect from your spouse. In my opinion, you should be going into it with a pretty set agenda. Pick a few things to tackle and talk about those things. They might be bedtime, homework, or getting to school on time. I also think it’s important to get some input from your kids and listen to what they have to say. So while you should have a set agenda, I think it’s important to make this a fairly open conversation, with everyone getting their concerns on the table.

It’s useful to involve your younger kids in these meetings, even if they may be listening more than they’re talking. It’s okay if they do an activity like coloring while everyone is talking. Remember, they’re part of the family and they should have a part in developing the back–to–school structure, even if it’s only being present and listening.
Be Realistic. Don’t Tackle Everything. Focus on the Problems That Are Most Crucial

If the last school year was horrible in every way, you may be tempted to lay out a long list of new rules for your kids at the family meeting. But I don’t think you want to work on too many things at once because you’ll just set yourself up for failure. Instead, pick out the things that are most important and also the most likely to succeed. Don’t go after everything; pick the problems that are the most crucial.

Think of the things that are really a “must do” to make the school year work. You could also simply pick the time of day that proved to be the most difficult last year. Make it a problem-solving discussion. For example, you can say, “Okay, we’re going to focus on mornings. We had a hard time last year and it didn’t work well for anyone. How are we going to make the mornings better?” Or, if homework was the issue for your child in the previous school year, focus on what homework time is going to look like from now on.

Talk to Your Child—Specifically—about What Needs to Change

If your child had a hard year behaviorally or academically last year, I think it’s important to have a conversation with him about what’s going to change and what needs to change. If you don’t address it specifically, you’ll have a thousand pound gorilla in the room that no one wants to talk about, and nothing will change. If you address it as a problem that you’re going to solve together, your child will have a better understanding of what change looks like and how to do it, and that you believe it will be better this year.

If your child is younger, you might develop a chart or a poster for them that lists out the new structure and expectations, or just give them simple reminders of what the new routine and new structure might look like. If you have a teen who does not participate, you can give suggestions: “Last year, you had a hard time with homework. What are some things we can do this year to change that?” If your child doesn’t answer, you can say, “How about getting you some help from school with math?” or “You liked Mr. Jones, your Algebra teacher. I can see if he has any good ideas to help you.”

Remember that it takes everyone’s efforts to make this work—especially yours. I’m a mom myself and I understand that going back to school can be hard on parents. You have to change your routine, too; you have to learn to reschedule. You might have to get up earlier, and most certainly you’ll have to transport your kids to more places. So the more preparation everybody can have for this, the better that everyone will do—and the more chance there will be for success.

Set the Expectation for a Better Year

Try to set an expectation with your child from the start that it’s going to be a better year. I think you need to be both hopeful and realistic. It could be that your child is going to have better connections with the teacher, or it could just be a better year for learning. The child could be that much older and that much more ready to take in information.

You can say to your child, “Okay Taylor, do you remember how it went last year when the teacher was asking you to turn in assignments? Remember how you weren’t able to get them in on time? What are we going to do this year to make that better for you, so you don’t get into trouble?” Talk about ways your child can hand his homework in and remind him of all the things he learned last year. “You learned what didn’t work when you weren’t organized with homework. You know how that failed. Let’s look at some ways to get organized.”

You’re also going to remind him of the things that did work last year and try to build on them while trying to avoid the things that didn’t work because of lack of structure or preparation. For example, you can say, “Remember how Mrs. Lawrence had you write down your reading assignments in your notebook each night and then check off when you’d completed something. That seemed to really help. Why don’t you do that with all of your classes this year.” In other words, use the lessons from the previous year to plan to do things differently this year.
After the School Year Has Already Started

If your child’s school year has started and you’re noticing issues cropping up, you are probably feeling frustrated and apprehensive already. But remember, you’re coming into this new year with more information than you had the previous year. Here’s what you can do with that information:

Find Someone at the School with Whom You Can Align

I always tell parents to try to find somebody in the school who you can “partner” with, someone who’s going to help you help your child do better academically, socially or behaviorally. It might be a teacher who understands and likes your child, or a guidance counselor or school social worker who can connect you with resources. The important thing is to try to make some positive relationships with people in the school. Your child is going to be there for the year, so the more people who you can team up with, the better.

Remember That It’s Never Too Late

Remember that it’s never too late to establish structure. If structure is needed now, it will always be needed. It’s not something that goes away. The good news is that it can be introduced at any time. It’s just like having a good plan—and a good plan can be put in place at any time. So figure out what the expectations are, what the structure needs to be, and then introduce it in the best way to help your child. For some kids, that’s going to be talking to them and being honest about what needs to happen. This might include saying something like, “We haven’t gotten our act together yet as a family, but we’re going to do that now. It’s going to be helpful for all of us to get a new schedule going.” With other kids, you need to just set up the structure and say, “We’re all going to need to follow this now.” Don’t be afraid to be honest.

Parents also need to realize that the new school routine actually requires a whole new set of organization for them. You need to know what the activities are, which papers need to come home with your child from the school, and which papers you need to read and return. You also need to plan how the school week looks, how you will get everyone to their activities, how you will fit in homework time, and how you will manage to keep things on an even keel. It’s challenging for everyone, but it’s really never too late.

Look for the Lesson

Even though it’s hard, it’s good to think about the previous school year and look at it as a lesson. Go back to last year and say, “What was my area of greatest pain?” As hard as that is, just tackle it head on. You might also ask, “What was my area of greatest learning?” The answer may be a combination of both. Ideally, you’ve learned something from last year. You might have to think hard about what that learning was, but I think you will find it. In fact, it’s been my experience that the struggles we go through are often the things that teach us the most. So try to combine what you learned with what really was the most difficult thing you and your child dealt with. Use that knowledge to prepare for and inform your decisions in the coming year.

A Special Note about Kids with Learning Disabilities or Anxiety

Kids with Learning Disabilities: I think it’s particularly hard for kids with learning disabilities to go back to school because they really are going to struggle in class; it is going to be challenging for them and they know it. I think that as a parent, you really need to set clear limits and have a positive discussion with your child about school. At the same time, be certain to talk with the school to make sure that your child with special learning needs gets what he requires during the year. Don’t enter into these conversations with a negative frame of mind about the school; that won’t help your child. Instead, come in with realistic goals about how the school can match your child’s learning needs and how you can partner with the school to support those needs.
Kids with Anxiety: For kids with anxiety, it may be really hard to do too much talking about school before it begins, because it’s just going to raise their fears. Keep the conversation short and sweet. With younger kids, instead of talking about things, make some posters or create some visual reminders. And be open to hearing what your child has to say about school so that if he does get anxious—if things are going wrong once school starts, for example—he can come to you to talk about it.

I recommend that you start opening that channel before the school year begins. Try not to dwell on it yourself because your anxious child is likely doing that in his own head, and will pick up on your anxiety. But be open to hearing your child’s worries about school; be a safe place for him to take those worries—and then move on from them. Don’t focus on them and don’t take them on as your own. After all, they’re just worries—and worrying has never gotten anyone anywhere.

If your child has a certain anxiety about gym class or algebra you can also look at it as a problem, and ask, “How are we going to solve it?” I think kids who are anxious are going to see one giant bundle of problems—and it’s probably a tangled bundle of problems at that. Your job as the parent is to pull that apart and help them tackle one thing at a time. Pick the thing your child is most likely to succeed at, and go from there.

Try Not to Do It Alone

Don’t forget, you’re making this transition into the school year along with your child. Try not to do it alone. Talk with your spouse and come at it as a team. If you’re a single parent, speak with other parents, family and friends. Be kind to yourself and reduce your own expectations that you have to “solve everything.” Try to say, “If it was a terrible year last year, this will be a better year. It may not be perfect, but it can be better.”