

The Back-to-School Parent by Natasha Dansie

Back-to-school is an exciting time! A new school year carries with it a special energy and enthusiasm that can be motivating. A new school year can also be stressful. A change in routine, a new environment, and learning new things can present challenges and pressures. How can parents be at their best for back-to-school? Here are some tips:

- **Establish a routine.** Children, and most of us in fact, thrive in a stable, predictable environment. It's the routine of a school schedule that many parents look forward to at this time of year. Establish a regular bedtime routine. The bedtime routine is perfect for reading, one-on-one time, and personal hygiene such as baths and brushing teeth. Establish a regular morning routine. Wake up at the same time each day. Specify for your child exactly what needs to be done before school each day. Pictures for young children and a checklist for older children can help morning routines run smoothly. Practicing the morning routine a few times before the first day of school can reduce anxiety and provide teaching opportunities without the pressure of the school day. Establish an after-school routine. Identify what needs to be done in order of priority each day when school ends. This could include reading, chores, snacks, and should certainly include play.
- **Communicate with the school and teacher.** Either at "back-to-school" night or within the first week of school, make an effort to meet your child's teacher in person. Learn what the preferred method of parent communication is. Will there be a newsletter coming home that you should watch for? Is there a class blog or app? Can you contact the teacher through text message or is email best? Make sure you are conducting a daily "backpack dump" with your child. By going through the things he or she brings home each day, you will not only see important information sent home from school, but you will have a chance to talk with your child about the things he or she is learning, what is interesting, challenging, and exciting. This "backpack dump" should be part of your daily routine and is a critical part of communication with the teacher and the school.
- **Participate in regular "talk time."** One of the things at the top of your "back-to-school" to-do list is to establish regular "talk time" with each of your children. During this essential time, your child does the talking, which means the parent does the listening. Every human being has an innate need to be heard and understood. As a parent who meets the needs of your children, you make the effort to set aside time each day to *listen* to your child and help him or her feel *heard* and *understood*. Talk time is a time for empathy, questions, listening, and love. It is not a time for lectures. If "Talk Time" is new to your child, you may have to prompt him or her with questions to get conversation started. Be patient and keep trying. Talk times improve over time with practice.
- **Model learning.** The most effective teacher is example. Do your children see you learning new things? Do you model learning as an exciting adventure? Does your family conversation include new things you learned that day? Do your children see you approaching each day as an opportunity to learn? When children are shown that learning is a lifelong quest, they are more likely to have a positive approach to school even when it seems like the topics are not immediately relevant.

- **Celebrate effort rather than success.** Part of learning something new most often involves making mistakes along the way. Unfortunately, children sometimes fear failure so much that they are afraid to try, or learn, something new. Rather than focus on the intermittent successes of your child, focus on celebrating the efforts put forth. Focusing on effort might sound something like this during the backpack dump, “Wow! It looks like you worked hard on this,” rather than, “Nice job getting 100%.” When you see a low score on an assignment or worksheet consider asking, “What did you learn here?” rather than pointing out the low grade. Be sure your children see you making mistakes and learning along the way.

Whether you’re looking forward to the start of a new school year or dreading it, there are some specific things that you can do to improve the chances that this school year can be a positive experience for you and your child. For more tips and tools in parenting, consider registering for our FREE upcoming “Fathering with Love & Logic” series at Red Cliffs Elementary starting Thursday September 6.

Registration is open at www.healthyrelationshipsutah.org. Contact Natasha Dansie at natasha.dansie@usu.edu with questions.