

School days are here again – Plan wisely

Hard to believe the summer is over and once again the school buses are taking to the road. Some children are off to school for the first time, many are returning, but it always feels like a new venture each September.

I would suggest going into the venture with intentionality for the year to come. Set some goals. Ask each of your children what they want to accomplish this year. Come up with some questions that they can answer as if it were next June, like “What grades would you like to have?” “Who do you want to be friends with and who might you want to drop?” Get some funny ones in too. Hold a family meeting (doesn’t have to be formal) to discuss what will work and not work for school day routines. Go over past successes and failures and actually write down some thoughts about what will work better.

The key is to make sure you are not telling your children what they have to do. They will tune out, slump in their seats, groan, and ask to be excused, if they’re that polite about it! This must be a joint effort and to make sure your kids know that, ask first what didn’t work for them. If no response, try, “For instance, did I get on your back too much about homework, or did the morning rush get too rushed for you?” Say that you really want it to work for everyone this year so the days go smoothly and everyone gets their needs met as best as possible.

You may want to make 2 lists. If one of your children wants to be the scribe, all the better. One list is what didn’t work last year, the other what did. At first let your children do most of the talking to get them involved and then add what worked and didn’t work for you. If it’s the first year of school, take turns making a list of what you would both like mornings and evenings to be like. Make a list of morning and evening routines and responsibilities in no particular order. Make sure everyone agrees on what is expected of them. Negotiation may need to happen here. The rule is it must work for everyone, so go back to the drawing board until it does.

Draw up schedules for mornings and evenings with either specific or general time frames depending on what each of your children needs. I always suggest laying out clothes (I still do it!), filling backpacks, and making lunches the night before. They can be added to and checked the next morning but the

likelihood of forgetting homework, losing something, or not having enough time is far less.

Some children love checking off what they have accomplished. A dry-erase board with a list of responsibilities and empty boxes to check can be a major motivator and gets you and your voice out of the equation. Older children can write their own list of responsibilities as well, checking with you to make sure they have everything. Some suggestions might be: brush teeth, bath, feed dog, set table, bring in wood, clear table, homework (make specific), make lunch, etc. Of course after school activities and projects must be included in the schedule for each child. But the basic structure of the day can remain once you get the kinks out and it works for all.

I can hear many voices out there saying that will never work for my kids. They'll think it's stupid, they'll be out here in 2 seconds. These are probably kids who are used to being told what to do, feel ordered, and are expected to help their parents' agendas work smoothly. They don't want to hear one more word about what they have to do. It's not that they're being defiant or rude, they are telling you that they are not used to feeling considered in the planning. Think carefully about how you initiate this project. Try something like, "You know school mornings and nights have been pretty hectic around here in the past. One of the problems could be that I haven't really listened to you guys and what you need to make the routines work well. Can we talk about what hasn't worked for you and see if we can make it better?" Offer this very off-handedly as you are busy doing something that does not require much eye-contact. Instead of sitting down and planning you may need to do this more piecemeal and day-to-day until they trust that you really mean to not only include them but hear their suggestions and take them seriously. It often takes awhile for kids to trust that their parents want to change.

These suggestions may seem a bit rigid and structured, but if you are used to chaotic mornings and evenings filled with homework stress and power struggles, a structured, planned routine may be just what you need. Things will run much smoother if you take the time now. Try it. Set a date in 4 weeks or so to reevaluate and decide what needs changing. Of course make it fit your style and

family needs. It's the intention that counts. When we put our minds to something, it's amazing what they can accomplish.

For homework suggestions check www.bonnieharris.com, column, click archives, and scroll down to Homework Habits.