

7 WAYS TO GET YOUR KIDS SCHOOL-READY

Buying fresh notebooks and rulers isn't enough. A pediatrician offers tips.

By Haley Longman



The camp trunks are unpacked and back in the attic, the school supplies are purchased, the classrooms have been located. But are your children really ready to get back to the books? When BERGEN sought out Irene Shevelev, M.D., a pediatrician at Valley Pediatrics in Ho-Ho-Kus and Ramsey, she shared the end-of-summer checklist she uses to help parents be sure their kids are in tip-top shape physically and emotionally for the return to classrooms.

"It's important to have a child who is well-rested and ready to tackle the school year," says the doctor. Here are the seven ways she suggests to help ensure that your pre-schooler, teen or in-between is well prepared for academic year 2022–2023:

- **Schedule physicals.** Children should get a physical exam by their pediatrician every year. Some parents time the annual physical to their children's birthdays, while others schedule them before school starts to make sure they're up-to-date on all required tests.

"Physicals are our opportunity to take time to examine each child holistically," says Dr. Shevelev. "We check physical, mental and emotional development, discuss concerns with children and their parents and have a chance to catch issues before they become problems." Annual physicals routinely include vision screening and hearing screening as well; these start at six months of age and three years, respectively.

- **Stay up-to-date on vaccinations.** Many of the vaccines required by schools in the state of New Jersey starting in kindergarten—including DTaP, polio, MMR and hepatitis B—are given in a multi-part series over the course of many visits (and several years). As long as you stay up-to-date with your pediatrician's immunization schedule, Dr. Shevelev notes, you won't run into any surprises before the school year officially begins. As kids get older, you may want to immunize your child with additional vaccines that are important but aren't necessarily mandated, such as meningitis B. "I advise almost any teenager heading off to college to consider meningitis B vaccination," says our doc. "There have been too many avoidable outbreaks over the years in dorms, and this vaccination is a really simple way to avoid needless tragedy." Talk to your practitioner about what other shots your child may benefit from.

- **Stay informed about the COVID-19 vaccine.** In June, the Food and Drug Administration approved the COVID-19 vaccine to be administered to children ages 6 months to 5 years. Do your research on the topic before booking your appointment at your pediatrician's office, a local hospital or a local pharmacy. For example, note the differences between Pfizer's and Moderna's vaccines when it comes to the timing of full immunity and the limitations of each vaccine. Additionally, Moderna is given in two doses over four weeks, while Pfizer is given three times, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. So, Dr. Shevelev adds, "make sure you start the series early enough so that your kids are fully immune before school, when their time around people

in enclosed spaces really increases." Keep in mind, however, that though these vaccines will lessen the degree of symptoms and the risk of hospitalization and death from coronavirus, "infections do still occur, and appropriate precautions should be taken to avoid infection, particularly when there is a risk of exposing someone who is immunocompromised." She adds: "That said, once they're protected, let your kids be kids!"

- **Serve healthy food.** It wouldn't be summer without hot dogs and ice cream, but hopefully these haven't been a steady diet for your tribe. In any case, it's time to establish or confirm a healthy food routine. Dr. Shevelev advises balancing such special treats with nutritious, home-cooked meals to ensure children are getting a well-balanced diet. Water consumption is important too; kids 4-8 should consume 5 cups of liquid (water and/or milk) a day, and children 9+ should aim for 7-8 cups daily. For tweens and teens who are active in sports or really exerting themselves outside in the summer, replenish electrolytes with Gatorade as well. "Have your kids spend as much time as they can outside, soaking up the sun, running around and keeping active," says the doctor, "and the balance will in most cases work itself out."

- **Ease fears.** It's normal for kids of all ages to have some apprehension about starting a new academic year. It helps to ease that anxiety if parents cast the school year in a positive light, focusing on aspects of school that your child enjoys most, whether that's a particular academic subject, sports, the arts or being with friends. However, says Dr. Shevelev, "if you find your child is really dreading school, it may be time to get your pediatrician and/or school involved" to make sure there isn't an underlying medical, social or academic issue that needs to be addressed before September.

- **Get back into a sleep schedule.** Waking up early for school is tough—even tougher after having a not-as-rigid schedule all summer. That's why it's best to start kids on their "normal" routines about two weeks before school begins, if possible, which is usually that in-between time in late August after camp and before school. "Optimally, this means timing meals and sleep every day as if it were a school day," says our expert, "targeting real bedtimes that allow kids until about age five 10 to 12 hours of sleep and older children nine to 10 hours before they need to wake up in time to catch the bus." Expect pushback, she says, but remember that starting this transition early makes the eventual start of school less of a shock to the system. It also lowers the likelihood of exhaustion; distracted, overly tired kids are more prone to getting sick the very first week back, the doc says.

- **Savor the moment.** Think about it this way—you only have eighteen summers with your kids before they're (hopefully) off on their own, so try to find time to kick back, take it all in and enjoy. "You certainly need to prepare your kids and yourself for school, but don't forget to get outside and enjoy the fresh air—throw a ball, go for a swim, host a barbecue," Dr. Shevelev says. (And P.S.: Don't forget the sunscreen!) It's also important to keep reading to and with your kids, which she says is "one of the best ways to help them learn and develop while strengthening your bond with them."



Irene Shevelev, M.D.