



Simple Strategies to make this the Healthiest, Happiest Back to School EVER!

Back to School . . . those words get some of us very excited, and others very bummed out. Regardless of which camp you fall into, back to school is absolutely a time of change.

Anytime we introduce change into our lives, life can quickly get out of control. Let's make the transition from summer freedom to back to school schedules positive and healthy!

In this e-book, we will talk about three key times of the school day that can cause a lot of stress for the busy family with one or more kids attending school (listen up homeschool families – this can apply to you too). The three areas are morning (my personal craziest), lunch and afterschool. All three areas present their own problems, but with a little bit of planning and some creativity, you can change your craziness into calm quickly and easily. Let's get started!

Morning

As I mentioned, this is the area I struggle with the most – everyone needs to be dressed, fed, packed up and ready to go within a very short time frame. If someone sleeps in, or can't find what they need, things can get out of control VERY quickly. Make a commitment to keep that from happening to you this year with these simple tips:

- **Get up fifteen minutes before the rest of the household.** It would be fantastic if you could get up an hour before the kids, but that's not always realistic. However, setting your alarm clock fifteen minutes earlier IS realistic. Use those fifteen minutes to get a jump on the day and keep yourself ahead of the gang. You'll be amazed out how much smoother your day will go with this one simple change.
- **Give your family responsibility.** Instead of running around like crazy people in the morning finding homework, making lunches, etc., make it a family rule that each family member is responsible for getting everything they need for the next day ready the night before. Then, it must be put next to the door. At first, you will probably have to supervise, and it may seem like more trouble than it's worth, but with enough practice, it will become a habit, and you'll never be scrambling in the morning again. This is also a terrific life skill to teach your children – if you ingrain the habit in them now, you will save them a lifetime of morning stress.
- **Create a morning routine.** Most people (and especially kids) thrive on routines. Create a simple morning routine that will keep them moving and on track for the correct departure time. Something as simple as: wake up, get dressed, eat breakfast, brush teeth, get in the car, etc. will work. Make a chart for kids so they can visually follow it on their own.
- **Have breakfast ready or at least prepped.** When you do your weekly shopping, keep breakfast in mind, and ensure you have enough healthy, quick foods for school day breakfasts. Many meals can be made ahead of time (muffins, quick breads, pancakes, waffles, etc.) and just re-heated in the morning. On the days you have more time, make breakfast special with eggs and bacon or fresh fruit smoothies.

Sample Week of Breakfasts

Monday – homemade zucchini muffins and smoothies

Tuesday – hard boiled eggs, juice and toast

Wednesday – pancakes with fresh berries

Thursday – zucchini muffins with fresh fruit

Friday – scrambled eggs, oven bacon and toast

Nice variety, very little morning work. Here's how I make a menu like this happen:

Sunday night bake a batch of muffins. Freeze half for later, and keep the other half on hand for Monday breakfast (known as Muffin Monday in our house) and Thursday.

Monday morning, pull out some muffins and throw a bunch of frozen fruit into the blender (or greens for green smoothies).

Monday night while you are cooking dinner, boil enough eggs for breakfast Tuesday (more if you think you'll eat them for snacks later in the week).

Tuesday night whip up pancake batter and either prepare the pancakes to be warmed up tomorrow, or if you'll have time in the morning, wait and make them fresh Wednesday. Feel free to make extra to freeze for a later date. Cut up berries and place in a bowl ready to go.

Thursday morning – pull out leftover muffins and some fruit – can't be easier than this!

Friday morning – as soon as you get up, put bacon on a cookie sheet and place in the oven at 325. They need to bake for 15 minutes, but that's plenty of time to scramble some eggs – add veggies if you want to boost the nutrition.

Other easy breakfast options include oatmeal, breakfast sandwiches or burritos (easy to make ahead and freeze) or homemade granola or Larabars.

Lunch Time

Even if you have fed your kids a healthy breakfast, after a busy morning at school, they are going to be hungry. You need to be prepared for it – regardless of whether you send lunch with them to school or feed them at home. The last thing you want to do is let them feed their bodies a bunch of junk – that won't get them successfully through thru the afternoon. Like breakfast, planning is key, and here are a few tips to ensure they will eat that healthy lunch you took the time to pack!

- **Ask your kids.** In the last few weeks of summer, ask your kids what foods they think they would like for lunches once school starts. You might be surprised at what they come up with. Regardless, by brainstorming together and letting them come up with at least part of the menus, they are much more likely to eat it! It's important to do this exercise periodically – taste buds can be fickle and a favorite food today can change overnight.
- **Create a schedule.** The school cafeteria has a schedule – why can't you? Creating a schedule ensures a variety of food and makes life much easier for you and your kids. Your schedule can be weekly or monthly and it can be as specific or as vague as you'd like. Even putting together something as simple as Monday = sandwich, Tuesday = soup, etc. will help you figure out what to make for lunches.
- **Use my lunch "formula" to plan your meals.** When packing a lunch, include a "main" dish (like a sandwich, salad, soup, etc.), a veggie, a fruit and a "treat." This is an easy way to ensure your lunch is well rounded and contains a good variety of nutrients. Sometimes your "main" dish will include extra veggies – sometimes not, and that's okay since you are also packing a veggie side. Remember too that the "treat" doesn't have to be junk food. A little note wishing your child a great day, a joke or a survey (my kids love those) to fill out counts as a treat in my book. (Of course sometimes a piece of dark chocolate fits the bill too!)

Sample Week of School Lunches

Monday – sandwich, carrot and green pepper sticks, grapes, piece of dark chocolate

Tuesday – homemade soup, bread, edamame, an apple, funny joke

Wednesday – homemade “lunchables” (includes meat, cheese and crackers), celery and ranch dip, clementine, peanut butter chocolate cookie

Thursday – pasta with red sauce, salad with ranch dressing, grapes, note from mom

Friday – pb&J (or pb& honey), carrot sticks and cherry tomatoes, cut up melon, trail mix

To make it easier to pack a variety of foods, invest in a small thermos, an ice pack and some reusable containers. I also always include a water bottle filled in the morning with water and ice. Here’s how I would easily make the above menu happen:

Sunday night – make sandwich, cut up veggies (for the whole week, not just tomorrow). Put grapes in container.

Monday night – make edamame (great snack for Monday night, just put enough aside for lunch tomorrow too), write out joke.

Monday morning – heat up leftover soup (dinner Monday or pull from freezer) while you are making breakfast, put in thermos and add to lunch bag with rest of lunch.

Tuesday night – make up “lunchables” while you clean up kitchen after dinner. Pack celery (that is already cut up from Sunday) and ranch, put cookie in lunch bag.

Wednesday night – write note, put salad and dressing in containers

Thursday morning – heat up leftover pasta and put in thermos. Pull salad and grapes from fridge.

Thursday night – make sandwich, pack rest of Friday lunch ingredients.

This is just an example – and although it may seem like a lot of work, it’s really just taking advantage of leftovers, and prepping as much as you can the night (or even several days) before. Once you get used to thinking like this, it will become automatic for you and you’ll

never have to send money for questionable food with your child again – you know they'll be eating a healthy, well balanced lunch.

Afterschool

Mornings may be my struggle, but afterschool is my FAVORITE time of the school day. I'm excited to have the kids home again and eager to hear about their days. It can also be a tough time if you aren't ready for it. After a full day of school, kids are TIRED. They may still have afterschool activities, sports and homework to manage. They need a few minutes of downtime, some attention from a parent and a good routine.

- **Be ready.** I can't stress this one enough. Let's face it, you KNOW when the kids will arrive home, so if you are at home, stop what you are doing a few minutes before they arrive and relax – you'll need a burst of energy as soon as they walk in the door.
- **Plan out your snacks.** It is probably several hours until dinner, so kids need a little something to tide them over. Why not make sure it's healthy and delicious? If you are home, you can have it on the table ready for them, but if not, put a plate together the night before and stick it in the fridge – although they might not tell you, they will appreciate the thoughtfulness and you can feel confident they are eating a good snack.
- **Have a routine.** Work with your child to create a routine that meets their needs. Maybe they need to have a snack and then get their homework done so they don't procrastinate. Or maybe your child needs to rest first and then attack homework. Come up with something that is right for your child and keep it consistent.
- **Touch base.** This is easy if you are home, you can sit down and have a cup of tea or glass of water while they enjoy their snack or start their homework. It's a little harder if you aren't at home, but it can be done. Make a point to call your child as soon as they should be home (or have him/ her call you) and spend five minutes asking them about their day. This is a great habit to get into and will help set the tone for the rest of the evening.

Afterschool Snack Ideas

Crackers and cheese

Veggies and dip (ranch, hummus, salsa)

Homemade quesadillas

Fruit (whole or cut up)

Homemade muffins, quick breads, cookies

Granola or granola bars

Popcorn

Hard boiled eggs

Apples and peanut butter

Yogurt and fruit

Frozen yogurt tubes

Smoothies

Kale chips

Corn chips and salsa

Sample Daily Morning Checklist

7:00 Wake up, get dressed, brush hair

7:30 Breakfast

7:50 Brush teeth, put on shoes

8:00 Pick up backpack and lunches

8:05 Leave the house!

