Back to School Survival Kit

Lunch ideas, organizational tips, fun activities, and printables for kids.
The ABCs of Back to School for Parents

By Diane Milne

As the new school year begins, every parent wants to encourage success for their children. However, getting books and backpacks can sometimes overshadow the little things that make for a smooth and successful start to the school year. Here’s an alphabetical guide to the 26 details not to forget this back to school season.

A. Ask questions. Ask your child about his day at school. Try to ask questions that encourage more than yes or no answers. What did you learn? Who did you sit with at lunch? What books did the teacher read to you?

B. Breakfast. Kids learn best when they’ve had a nutritious breakfast. Schools often remind parents of this on testing days, but it’s important for kids to get off to a good start every day.

C. Communication. Communicate with your child’s teacher. Share your concerns, what you feel is working well for your child, and ask for clarification if something is unclear. For more tips, check out Communicating with Your Child’s Teacher.

D. Dates. Check dates of school holidays and plan accordingly. Calendars vary by district.

E. Effort. Praise your child’s best efforts. Not every child is a straight-A student. Let her know how proud you are when your child has truly done her best.

F. Friends. Get to know your child’s friends, and encourage relationships with those that are a positive influence.

G. Guidance counselor. Ask the school guidance counselor to talk with your child if he seems stressed by the birth of a sibling, the loss of a family member, or school relationships.
H. *Homework.* Provide a quiet place that is free of distractions, and help your child as needed, without doing the work for him.

I. *Illness.* Keep your child home if he is sick. Germs spread quickly in a classroom, and one sick child quickly becomes 25 sick children.

J. *Jot a note.* Be sure to send a written excuse when your child is absent. Too many unexcused absences can affect your child’s grades, or raise concerns of truancy.

K. *Know the rules.* Be familiar with school rules, policies, and dress code. If the Code of Conduct isn’t sent home with your child, check for it online.

L. *Listen.* Really listen when your child talks to you. Put down the newspaper, turn off the TV, close the laptop, and listen.

M. *Make choices.* With your child, choose which after-school activities are the most important. Kids need down-time, time for balanced meals, and plenty of sleep.

N. *Newsletter.* Read school and classroom newsletters regularly.

O. *Open House.* Attend your school’s Open House. Find out what’s going on in your child’s class, get to know the teacher, and look over your child’s work samples.

P. *Praise good behavior.* It’s easy to take positive behavior for granted, but good kids need to be praised for following the rules.

Q. *Quality time.* Busy lives make quality family time hard to find. Eat dinner together, go for a walk, or play a game with your child.

R. *Read your child’s textbooks.* Glance through the table of contents to find out what will be taught. Then talk about what your child is learning to help build excitement and make connections with the topics.
S. *Smile.* Mornings can be hectic, and a lot of kids bring this stress into the classroom with them. Try to send your child off with a smile and a hug to set a positive tone for the day.

T. *Tardiness.* In some schools, a certain number of tardy slips count as an unexcused absence. Be careful!

U. *Update the teacher.* If there are things going on that are affecting your child, let the teacher know. Kids react to separations, friends moving away, and the loss of a pet. Teachers can offer extra sympathy, understanding, and support.

V. *Volunteer.* If your schedule permits, offer to help in the classroom each week. If not, help from home by typing the class newsletter, cutting out art projects, or planning class parties. A parent’s involvement in the classroom promotes success in school. For more volunteering ideas, check out *A Guide to Getting Involved at Your Child’s School.*

W. *Website.* Check out the school website. You’ll find important information, changes in dates, and suggestions for ways to support your child.

X. *Don’t focus on the X’s.* When graded work is returned, don’t focus on the problems that are marked wrong. Rather than saying, “You only missed 7,” say “You got 93 right!”

Y. *Yell and shout.* Be your child’s biggest cheerleader when your child scores on the football field, participates in the science fair, or recognizes all of the letters of the alphabet. Your praise is more precious than any prize or sticker from the teacher.

Z. *Zip your mouth.* When you disagree with the teacher, go to her directly to discuss your concerns. Venting these frustrations in front of your child will undermine the teacher in your child’s eyes, and cause confusion. Work out your differences privately.
Quick Lunches Shopping List

By Diane Milne

Make lunch time a snap! With these ingredients on hand, you’ll have tons of options at your fingertips - from grilled chicken wraps, to Mexican burritos.

- Tortillas
- Pasta Sauce
- Whole Wheat Pasta
- Brown Rice
- Beans
- Whole Grain Bread
- Tuna
- Olive Oil
- Low Sodium Chicken Broth
- Whole Wheat Pizza Dough
- Chicken Breast
- Frozen Corn
- Salad Dressing
- Fresh Vegetables
- Lentils
- Fresh Fruit
- Yogurt
- Grilled Chicken Strips
- Raw Nuts
- Shredded Cheddar Cheese
- Shredded Mozzarella Cheese
- Precooked Shrimp
- Lean Ground Beef
- Kid-Friendly Drinks
15 Great Snack Ideas for Back to School

By Mindy Wright

Given the hectic weekday schedules of all members of the family, it’s difficult enough to get a healthful dinner on the table, much less worry about what kids are eating for snacks. Combined with different afterschool activity schedules, appetites, and palates, it’s near impossible to find a snack (and snack time) that will work for everyone.

Which is why it might be time to transform a shelf of your refrigerator to a “self-serve snack station.” This shelf, preferably at a lower height so everyone can easily see what’s on it, is filled with nutritious goodies that your kids can help themselves too—no need to ask their parents (and no need for parents to tend to doling out snacks). Parents instead prep the snack shelf on Sunday or Monday with enough food to last until Friday afternoon.

This allows mom and dad to have control over what the kids are snacking on, while allowing the kids the freedom to eat what they want when they want. (Within reason—you might want to have a “closing time” an hour or so before dinner.)

Having the ability to choose their snack helps sell a lot of snacks that might have been groaned at otherwise. The key behind the snack shelf is to stock it with plenty of foods that are good for your family (when was the last time you were worried your child was eating too many carrot sticks?) It takes a little prep work but it is well worth the effort.

First, start with the staples. Every week try to have a variety of items from the list. All food should be ready to eat (you’ve already done all the peeling, slicing, or other prep work necessary) and are preferably finger foods. Here are some staples to consider:
• Ants on a log (celery sticks filled with peanut butter topped with raisins)
• Carrot sticks, with ranch dip in a small Tupperware container
• Edamame
• Bags of apple slices
• Melon wedges
• Grapes
• Blueberries
• String cheese
• Mini low fat yogurts
• Dried peaches
• Individual bags of raisins or dried cranberries
• Individual bags of trail mix

Then once or twice a week, surprise them with one of the "specials" of the house. The element of the unknown makes hitting the snack shelf even more fun—and makes sugary, processed foods a thing of the past. Here are a few ideas:

**Homemade Guacamole**

• 3 avocados
• 1 tablespoon lemon juice
• 2 tablespoons of your favorite salsa
• 2 tablespoons low fat sour cream

Using a knife, remove the avocado pits. Then using a spoon, scoop out the avocado flesh and cut into two-inch cubes. Place in a mixing bowl and add lemon juice, salsa, and sour cream. Mix on low speed until the dip is well blended and creamy.
Turkey Rollups

- 1 sheet of whole wheat flatbread
- 4 ounces of cream cheese, softened
- 2 tablespoons low fat ranch dressing
- 4 slices turkey
- 1/2 cucumber, thinly sliced

In a small bowl, whisk together the soft cream cheese with the ranch dressing. Using a small butter knife or offset spatula spread the cream cheese mixture to completely cover the top side of the flatbread. Lay slices of the turkey and cucumber atop the cream cheese. Roll up from the short side and slice into two-inch mini rolls. To store in the refrigerator, place a damp paper towel on top of the sandwiches (this prevents drying) and cover with plastic wrap.

Cashew Crunch Parfait

- 2 cups old fashioned oats
- 1 cup cashew pieces
- 1/4 cup vegetable oil
- 1/4 cup maple syrup
- 2 cups frozen raspberries, thawed and drained
- Low fat French vanilla yogurt

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. In a large bowl add the oats, cashews, vegetable oil and maple syrup and stir until well combined. Line a baking sheet with aluminum foil and spread the oat mixture over it evenly. Bake for 20 minutes, stirring the mix every five minutes for even cooking. Remove from the oven and allow to cool completely.

To assemble parfaits, use small clear glasses. Alternate layers of yogurt with layers of the berries. Leave room at the top of the glass and your child can sprinkle the cashew crunch on top to finish off the parfait (store in a plastic container next to the refrigerator for easy access).
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Saturday: __________________________________________________________________

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Due: ____________________________

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Supplies and Resources:

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Friends!

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Build a Back to School Bulletin Board

By Julie Williams

Congratulations! It’s back to school for your fourth grader, and you both are in for a great year. You can expect new reading books, new math work, and exciting new studies in science and social studies. And of course, some more growing up along the way! But schoolwork can get disorganized pretty quickly, too, when a kid this age is handling so many different subjects.

Teachers understand the issue, and they’ll do their best to keep things as organized as possible for their students and their families. But you can be a big help at home too, by helping your child set up an organized area to hold all of her important papers, forms and anything else she might need. This will be a great place to house all of those important materials, including those loose memos, like field trip permission forms, which always seem to build up. Even if chaos seems to take over at first, take heart: the pay off that comes with organization is always worth the effort. Kids do better, adults yell less, and nobody misses field trips!

Around this time of year, you can find lots of organization products at most stores. But with this homemade bulletin board project you can make your own organization tool at little or no cost right at home.
What You Need:

- Hang-up bulletin board that fits near your child’s desk, approximately 24x32” (or so)
- 1 yard of plain fabric in a design your child really likes (a good suggestion is cotton broadcloth, but you can also use flannel. (Beware heavy canvas, however, which is too thick)
- 6 yards of 1/2” wide grosgrain ribbon in a coordinating color
- Staple gun
- Package of flat-head thumbtacks in a coordinating color
- Masking Tape
- Felt, cut to the same size as the bulletin board, in a coordinating color

What You Do:

1. Take your bulletin board and lay it on a flat surface. If it has a frame on it, take the frame off. You can also purchase excellent bulletin board material at a hardware and lumber store, by the square yard, with no frame.

2. Lay the fabric over the bulletin board surface so that there is a generous overlap at the edges. Trim the fabric so that there is a border around each side, roughly 6” wide.

3. Carefully smooth the fabric over the bulletin board surface and fold it over the edge. Check again to make sure that the fabric on the front is not uneven. Then check the corners, and fold them as you might if you were wrapping a present.

4. Anchor the corners with masking tape, and then use the staple gun to staple the fabric permanently in place.
5. Now turn the bulletin board over and stretch the ribbon across the top of the front of the bulletin board. Start by draping the end of the ribbon about six inches in from the edge, over the top edge of the board, and anchor it with a staple. Then stretch the ribbon diagonally across the corner, pull it around and to the back, anchor and trim it. Lay out ribbons at intervals of 6-8” making diagonal stripes across the face of the board. Then crisscross the ribbons with another set, following the same steps, resulting in a lattice pattern across the face of the board.

6. At the junctions where each ribbon meets, take out your staple gun again, and anchor the junction with a staple. Then finish it off with a flat head thumbtack.

7. Finally, when all the ribbons are attached and secured, turn the bulletin board over and cover the back with the felt piece. Again, use the staple gun along the edges to staple the felt to the back, creating a smooth surface.

8. Congratulations! You’ve created a personal organization tool, styled just as your child likes, and most importantly, you and your child have made something that will make a big difference in her success at school and at home. Papers can be tacked anywhere on the bulletin board, but when small stuff comes in, you can tuck those things into the ribbons of the lattice. Your child will be proud of this bulletin board…and even prouder of the success that comes when she has a place for everything, and everything is in its place.
Parents, you’ve probably noticed by now: it’s a rare kid these days who will always study at a desk. Sure a desk is a nice idea, but if you ask kids themselves, many will give you some pretty convincing arguments about why they do their best thinking when they’re flopped on the floor or the couch. Or both!

If that’s the story in your house try meeting your kid halfway with this creative and practical “traveling desk.”

What You Need:

- A plastic “tool caddy” with a sturdy carrying handle and at least one pocket large enough for a clipboard, and several small pockets the right size for pens. (Note: you can find these at both hardware stores and craft stores)
- Clipboard with two kinds of paper: binder paper and plain white paper
- Pens, pencils, colored pencils, pencil sharpener
- 6” ruler
- White-out
- Glue Stick
- Scissors
- Small stapler
- Tape Dispenser
- 5x8” Index card
- Optional: sticky-back felt shapes and glitter glue

What to Do:

1. To get started, invite your child to decorate the outside of her caddy. If she makes it personal and makes it snazzy, it’s much more likely that this practical homework helper will be used a lot! Have your child write her name on the 5x8” index card, and decorate it brightly with colored markers, foam stickers and glitter glue if she likes.
2. Tape it securely to the front of the caddy.

3. Load up! The biggest pouch of your caddy will hold the clipboard, a crucial part of the kit. Choose a clipboard in a color your child likes (and consider decorating it, too—see our related activity!), and load it with several sheets of paper.

4. Place extra paper upright in the caddy, behind the clipboard, so it’s convenient for future use.

5. Pens and pencils are also crucial parts of the kit. For subjects like math and science or for first drafts of essays, there’s nothing like good old fashioned erasable pencil—but be sure to pack in a manual pencil sharpener for emergencies. For final essay drafts, blue and black pen is usually required, so include those as well. Finally, make sure you’ve included a generous pack of colored pencils or pens. Throughout elementary school, kids draw as well as write, and when lab sciences start in middle and high school, they’ll just keep going. You and your child can load her kit together and decide where she would like things and why.

6. Finally, you’ll need to add those other basic tools that your child may not use all the time, but are still good to have on hand: a 6” ruler, small stapler, small pair of scissors, white-out, and a roll of tape. You can do all the shopping together when you’re stocking up.

7. Keep the caddy in a convenient spot, on shelf or table, and invite your child to pull it out whenever it’s homework time. No matter where she flops, you can relax: she’ll have what she needs to get the job done!
Back to School Countdown: What to Do When

By Alisa Stoudt

Heading back to school takes mental preparation (for both you and the kids!). But if you’re like most parents, getting everything prepped, primed and done in advance just isn’t in the cards. Don’t sweat it: not everything has to be done at once. Use this guide as your countdown for what to accomplish when for smooth sailing into the school year.

4 Weeks Out:

Schedule your check-ups. If your school requires a visit to the pediatrician, call to schedule your appointments now. You’ll up your chances of getting seen before school starts.

Pay the school a visit. If your child is attending a new school or even just switching grades, visit the school to get her excited for the year to come. Locate the classroom, bathroom, and front office, and if your child is entering middle school or high school, suggest she walk the route of her class schedule to ease nerves about finding the rooms on the first day.

Start to get organized. Involve your kids in a fun organization project, such as creating a “project bin” where you’ll store all those little plastic toys, and odds and ends that kids inevitably collect. Jamie Norak, author of The Get Organized Answer Book, suggests sending kids on a scavenger hunt to find objects to add to the bin so you can use them in dioramas or other projects that come up.

2 weeks out:

Shop! Hit the stores to pick out some back to school clothes, or at least a first day of school outfit.
Create “Control Central.” Designate an area of your home where you’ll keep your calendar, phone messages, and a bulletin board. Kathy Peel, author of The Family Manager, says you can also make “inboxes” for your kids. The inboxes can be places where your kids unload and pick up permission slips and forms that need to be signed.

Manage supplies. If you come across back to school sales, stock up. “It’s wonderful to get good deals on supplies, but everything needs to then have a home,” warns Novak. “Nothing’s worse than buying items on sale and forgetting where you put them so you have to buy them again at full price.” Dedicate a space in your home where everyone knows to look for supplies.

Make play dates with school friends. Between camps and vacations, your child probably hasn’t seen many of his school friends over the summer. Set up some play dates so he can catch up and feel more comfortable when heading back to school with familiar faces.

Have a family celebration. “I like to plan some kind of special trip to a water park or a special cookout,” says Peel. “This helps show our excitement and gives us the opportunity to remind our kids that school is their ‘career’ and ask them about what they would like to accomplish this year.”

1 week out:

Go to orientation. If your child is going to a new school, be sure to attend the orientation so he’ll be prepared for school and is able to reconnect with old friends.

Get on schedule. Ease your child out of the lazy days of summer sleep-ins to the bright and early school mornings by gradually changing bed and wake-up times to be closer to the school schedule.

Figure out transportation. Will your child be traveling by bus, bike, or car? Figure out the details now, and work out a schedule with your spouse or carpool.
**Have a safety talk.** If your child will be riding the bus or her bike to school, talk about bus and bike safety. Additionally, pick code words for friends or caregivers who may pick your child up from school so your child will know it’s OK to get a ride with them.

**Set your morning schedule.** Work backwards from the time you need to leave the door in order to figure out how much time each child needs in the morning. Peel suggests adding in an extra 10-15 minutes for snags, as well as coming up with a rotating bathroom schedule and assigning kids tasks to help out.”Delegate chores like feeding the dog and selecting who will be the ‘town crier’—the person who gives the whole house a ‘10-minute warning’ with a special bell or buzzer,” she says.

*The night before:*

**Get everything ready to go.** Make sure the first day of school outfits are clean, backpacks and lunches are packed, and that everything is ready to be picked up on the way out the door.

**Write a note.** To help calm first-day jitters, write your child a little note and stash it in her backpack or lunch box. Kids feel special and cared for when they discover the secret message.

**Breathe.** If you’re feeling overwhelmed or worried about your lack of back to school organization, Novak says to remember that “school’s going to come, and your child will be happy and healthy no matter if she has 12 brand new colored pencils or not.” Try picking one thing to accomplish that will help the morning run smoothly, and you’ll already be in better shape.
Morning of:

**Build in some extra time.** Wake up a few minutes early so there’s time to give your child extra special braided hair, snap a few first-day pictures, and not have to rush out the door.

**Give yourself kudos.** Heading back to school can be stressful! Give yourself a pat on the back for making it through the big day.