

*by Jill Crawford, LCSW*

Welcome back! Come one, come all, here we are again, the dawn of a new school year. Time to dust off the backpacks, gather school supplies, and start setting those alarm clocks. How did we get here so fast? Amid the excitement and anticipation of a fresh start and seeing what this new year will hold in store for our children, many parents also experience a wave (or two) of dread as they begin thinking of the family stress that can so often accompany school. At this time last year, I wrote an article on the universal trials and tribulations of morning routine. This time around, as always inspired by the many kids and parents who share their struggles with me, I would like to give due time to the battles frequently waged in those pesky, potentially volatile after-school hours.

First, a caveat: **Know Your Child**. While this may sound obvious, it is so essential because *every child is different*. This is vitally important to remember as you receive advice (solicited or unsolicited) and hear anecdotes from well-meaning friends, family, or neighbors. What works for one child will not necessarily bring success for another. Your child and your family are unique, and the strategies below are simply ideas for consideration, which will likely need to be tailored to suit the strengths and needs of your brood.

Now onto those tips...

**Don't bombard your child with questions or demands the moment you see them.** This one I offer up on behalf of the kids. Whether you are picking them up or they are coming in on the bus, give them a few minutes to decompress and get settled before beginning the after-school inquisition: "How was your day?" "Do you have a lot of homework?" "Did you turn in your paper?" "Did you get your math test back?" "Did you work out your issue with (insert classmate name)?" "Remember, you have baseball tonight and your room still needs to get cleaned." I know you haven't seen them all day, you've missed them, and you're curious how they're doing. I also understand as a mom that there is a finite amount of time to get done all that needs to get done in an afternoon, and we can easily feel compelled to share this timeline with our kids as soon as they are in hearing distance, but try to refrain. By the end of the school day, they are tired. They are overstimulated from being around tons of people all day with nonstop sensory input. They are fried from focusing and stiff from sitting. They are just beginning to process the events of their day, which could include various stressors of the academic or social variety. Simply stated, they need a few minutes to breathe. This is especially true for our friendly tweens and teens. The younger set may fly in the door eager to share every moment with you. In that case, of course, be prepared to drop everything and listen with rapt absorption.

**Encourage your child to have a snack.** In my experience, most kids come in the door fairly ravenous after school and do not need to be reminded to snack. Some, however, make a beeline for their rooms or the TV or their friends, bypassing the kitchen. The snack does not need to be huge (nor should it be),

but lunch was hours ago at this point, and kids will need fuel to recharge their batteries and get through the afternoon. Having healthy options readily available will reduce arguments about their food choices and will give them the nutrients they need to power through homework and activities.

***Allow time to rest & recharge before starting homework.*** Kids need a break after school. Period. No matter how much homework they have, they need a break. It doesn't have to be a long break, but there needs to be a break. Time to clear out the cobwebs, time to stretch out their muscles, time to laugh and be silly, time to run. Families have different philosophies about the wisdom of such a break. Those who hesitate have likely had difficulty reining their child back in once the break is underway. Understood. Not every child is self-disciplined enough to go outside for 15 minutes and then return without any drama and obediently get down to work. Some have learned the hard way that their child refuses to come back inside or only does so after a meltdown. *Know your child.* In these cases, keep the break inside and the expectations clear, perhaps with use of a timer your child can operate and understand. Only you know what your child can manage. But the break is valuable in more ways than one; it can have a positive impact on your child's mood, outlook, sense of competence, and energy; it can wake up his or her brain and improve focus, which will ultimately contribute to a smoother homework experience. If you are concerned about time management, consider the break time on the front end a wise investment in reducing total homework time on the back end. (p.s. Practicing an instrument does not count as a break)

***Homework: Minimize distractions, make yourself scarce.*** Ideally, your child will have a quiet, distraction-free workspace where homework can be done on a regular basis. Many parents I see want to be "available" to help as needed, and so homework tends to be done in a central location like at the kitchen table. This can easily lead to disrupted concentration as the phone inevitably rings, another child comes in, or amiable chit-chat ensues. In my experience, it can also lead to whining, arguing, and power struggles, kids slumped down in chairs, breaking pencils, doodling, and any other masterful avoidance tactics they might devise. Unless your child absolutely requires your homework supervision/assistance to stay on track, nudge them toward working independently. They can always come ask for help if they get stuck (or better yet, save up all the tricky questions until they are otherwise done, so as to minimize the interruptions to their work flow). They will be proud of their independence, and the time it takes to complete their assignments will be dramatically reduced, as will conflicts.

***Encourage small breaks with large workloads.*** For the older kids with bigger workloads, or the younger ones who might struggle more, encourage small (5 minutes or less) breaks between subjects or at the end of a particularly taxing assignment. Children can benefit from getting up and moving their bodies, getting a quick change of scenery, maybe a drink, or just taking a moment to pat themselves on the shoulder for what they've completed so far. Frustration can build quickly during homework time, and breaks afford an opportunity to interrupt that escalation.

***Set aside evenings for leisure activity, family togetherness.*** In an ideal world, all homework would be done before dinnertime. Kids (and parents) obviously become more tired (irritable) as the afternoon

wears on, focus strays, and motivation declines. The sooner it's done, the sooner everyone can relax. Evenings can then be reserved for family time or one of your child's favorite leisure activities.

***Strive for a calm wind-down to bedtime.*** Begin winding down in advance of bedtime prep. Switching over to a quiet activity to wrap up the night (e.g. reading, doing a puzzle, snuggling and talking, playing peaceful music) is a good way to start quieting down your household. Consider dimming the lights to further calm everyone down. Avoid potentially stressful discussions at this hour. Be mindful of your goal time for lights out and move in this direction with plenty of lead time to avoid a frenzied crunch at the last minute.

Wishing you peaceful waters ahead as your year gets underway. Enjoy the many adventures that are sure to follow!

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