

A BACK-TO-SCHOOL FIELD GUIDE

How to prepare your kid(s) and your family so you're ready to survive and thrive.

A collaboration between

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WE'RE GOING, GOING, BACK, BACK...



Back in '*the day*', the long, lazy summer days would be violently interrupted by terribly perky commercials about back-to-school sales. Mervyn's, Marshall's, and TJ Maxx would let moms and kids know it was time to cast aside their careless attitudes and start to buckle up. These days, Amazon and Google give us the warning and sound the alarm.

- Maybe you find yourself in **Camp Get-Out-of-Here**: you're sick and tired of your kids being home all day on their devices, telling you about how bored they are, making messes, and forcing you to pull your hair out.
- Or, perhaps you're more in **Camp Oh-No-Not-Yet!**: the thought of hectic mornings, making lunches, coordinating pick-up, soccer practices, tutoring sessions, and never-ending dinners to fix makes you lightheaded.

We did a quick poll and asked parents what their biggest concern, challenge, or worry about school starting, and here's what they said:

- *"I just hope they can find a better group of friends this year."*
- *"I can't wait to get them out of the house all day!"*
- *"My child struggles with a lot of anxiety—about grades, about germs, and friends. I hope they can manage that better this year."*
- *"We're worried about everything our kid is taking on—AP Classes, college applications, drama, sports, not to mention sleep and taking care of themselves."*

We know it's a big transition to go back to school. That's why we put together this field guide.

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CHAPTER
1

HERE WE GO AGAIN

WHEN KIDS FEEL STRESS, THEY CAN'T THINK AS CLEARLY.

No one can.

They can't think creatively, or have a long-term perspective, or consider their own values, or hear the voice of their parents bringing wisdom.



That's why it's so incredibly vital to be intentional to give our kids the tools they need to handle stressful situations, like going back to school.

For kids, going back-to-school probably a bigger transition than you realize. First, let's talk about transitions in general.

For every significant life transition, there are things you gain and things you lose. When it comes to summer, kids **gain** the opportunity to be around friends again, have structure and schedules, and get busy with activities. But, they **lose** a lot of their autonomy and freedom from less social pressure.

For kids, especially starting in adolescence, being around their peers is EVERYTHING.

The grade school years, of course, are rich with physical and emotional growth. Kids this age need to feel secure and will also push boundaries to figure out where the boundaries are with both their peers and adults in their life. Safe and supportive communication should be early and frequent with this age group to learn the connection between actions and consequences. It's important to remember that consequences can be positive or negative! Be sure to reinforce the positives and offer supportive guidance around the negatives. The warm and responsive space you can create with the children in your life will become so important as they head into their teen years.

We all have a story about getting picked last for the kickball team in P.E. class back in elementary school. The experiences of rejection stay with us for a long time, imprinting memories on us that can undermine a lot throughout our lives. The need to fit in, be accepted, and feel like you belong for who you truly are is a profoundly human experience. Our kids feel it more than we do, and if we as parents and educators can keep that in mind, we will be better equipped to guide them to a thriving life.

Erik Erikson is known as the father of adult development. He was a psychologist who coined the phrase, 'identity crisis', and helped us understand the developmental stages we all go through on the way to adulthood. He said the primary challenge for adolescents is to create a healthy personal identity and healthy peer relationships — two dynamics often at odds with each other.

Fitting in is a process that we try to manage for our kids when they are little. We want them to wear the right, in-fashion clothing at preschool and eat the best diet. We want them to avoid embarrassment or harassment on the playground. But when they reach the middle school years, they take over the management of fitting in on their own terms. As their brains wake up to self-consciousness, they also shift the focus of their security away from their caregivers toward their peers. They are literally looking at their peers as a stand-in mirror — to help them get an impression of themselves, who they are, and how they're measured.

Here's the problem: their desire to fit in is actually not their ultimate goal.

What teens want is to feel like they belong. If you just stop at fitting in, you learn to sacrifice or hide some important parts of yourself to be able to blend in and be accepted rather than rejected.

True belonging, however, comes when we are accepted because of our uniqueness and differences. It's not until we truly own our quirky selves, our preferences, our interests, and our quirks — and disclose them to others — that we can experience what we really hope for deep down.

Of course, adolescence is so much about exploration and discovery. We don't yet know ourselves, so we need to try on different personas to see how they resonate or not. We must try different values and adopt different views to see if they work for us. We are searching for a life that is both intrinsically consistent with who we are and aspirational for whom we want to become.

That's all happening inside a teenager, and they're unaware of it. The danger is that they might make poor choices during these crucial years that will impact the rest of their lives. (The best research shows that 90% of lifelong addiction struggles start during the teen years.)

It's a critical time for them, and they need the best adult intervention and guidance we can give them.

Whether your kid is returning to elementary school or high school, all of those dynamics mean stress for them. And that stress gets triggered when they start feeling the back-to-school vibes.

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CHAPTER 2

TAKING INVENTORY

Our kids need unique support from their parents and guardians.

THEY NEED TO RECOGNIZE THE STRENGTH(S) THEY ALREADY HAVE,

and learn how to build upon their strengths to handle complexity, conflict, and difficult situations.



Every kid has talents, assets, strengths, and resources to draw upon when it comes to stressful circumstances. No matter who they are, each kid has a unique mixture of personality, experiences, and innate abilities

Some are very forward-thinking, so finding something to look forward to with optimism and hope.

Some are more regimented, so the more they can understand and see their calendar, obligations, and expectations, the more they'll be able to stay calm.

Some have an incredible way of making new friends quickly.

Some are good at putting others at ease.

Some kids know how to build relationships with adults.

Some kids are funny.

Some kids love to learn.

Some love to solve puzzles and problems.

Every kid has a foundation of strength, but they'll likely need your help in recognizing and remembering what makes them strong.

You have an opportunity to help your kids take inventory of the positive resources they have. What does that look like, though?

- **Point them out:** take a few minutes to write down what you've observed your child is naturally good at. Recall situations where things came easily to them. Think about the activities, hobbies, or moments where they seem to come alive or invest a lot of energy. What themes do you notice? Find a good moment (perhaps in the car, at the dinner table, or bedtime), and share your list with them.
- **Make their own list:** ask your kid to add to your list. What do they see in themselves, not just academic strengths but perhaps strengths with ideas, people, or their hands?
- **Tell a story:** look back in your life and try to remember moments when you've felt overwhelmed, stressed, or out of place and in over your head. What assets did you employ to get you through the situation? The more stories you tell your kids about the difficult situations you've been through and how you got through them, the more they'll be able to recognize themselves in your stories.

Children learning to own their strengths and call upon their resources will do better in difficult or stressful situations.

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3 CHAPTER

PREPARE FOR THE
INEVITABLE

So what is it that teachers and parents want for their kids? Drumroll,
please...

**9/10 EDUCATORS
CARE MORE ABOUT
WHO THEIR
STUDENTS BECOME
THAN WHAT THEIR
STUDENTS KNOW.**



Kids experience stress- a lot. Remember or imagine what a typical teenager goes through on any given day. Pressure from friends, parents, teachers, and coaches. The constant threat of peer rejection. The feeling like you're always behind. The extraordinary pressure of impending college admissions. Siblings. Global pandemics.

Stress is actually a response we have to things called stressors. Stressors are situations, interactions, or events that trigger a threat response. Stressors can be external events happening towards us or around us, or they can be internal feelings. They can also be non-events (think about when your paycheck doesn't get deposited- that non-event has become a stressful situation!).

We all respond differently to stressors. For one person they feel threatened when they feel like someone doesn't like them. Another person might not bat an eye.

There are two dynamics that everyone can learn to manage stress effectively:

Diagnosis: the ability to understand how you've been triggered. To recognize what's happening to you on a biological and psychological level. To be able to identify the source of the stress.

Prescription: the ability to respond positively and productively to your own stress response.

In other words, we're talking about self-awareness and self-management, critical skills to handle life's complexities, especially through hard things.

We can teach kids to see and manage stress on biological and philosophical levels.

On the biological side, there has been great research to help us understand what happens to us when we feel triggered by a stress response: in a split second, the chemical epinephrine gets pumped into our brain, so our heart rate and blood pressure increase, muscles tense, and we start breathing quickly. Our entire biological system gets primed to GO- go fight, go run, or play dead. Key body systems like critical thinking and reasoning, learning, creativity, and empathy turn off.

When we're in a stress response, especially in chronic stress, we can't:

- Think clearly
- Handle complexity
- Connect divergent ideas or viewpoints
- Recall our personal values or ambitions
- Connect with others
- Learn new concepts

Sometimes, other people can help us manage our stress. Teachers can carve out time in class for a slow breathing exercise. Parents can help us see a broader perspective or get a snack. But as we get older, it's important to learn that we have to help ourselves. We have to learn how to manage our reactions to stressful situations. There's no way to control what happens, but we can learn more effective ways to respond.

In the book *Burnout: The Secret to Solving the Stress Cycle*, authors Emily and Amelia Nagoski share seven simple things we can do when stressed:

- Physical activity (30 min a day of exercise would be excellent, but even clenching every muscle in your body for a count of 10 will do wonders)
- Deep, concentrated breathing for a couple of minutes
- Have a positive social interaction with someone you enjoy
- Laughter
- Hug (for at least 20 seconds)
- A good cry
- Create something

We can teach kids to recognize their stress responses and try different ways to address them.

It helps if we recognize our stress responses and share them out loud with our kids. They will watch us and learn how important (and normal) it is to get stressed and become more self-aware.

Just as important, we can model healthy, effective stress management strategies (like the ones above) for them. Those are different than, say, social media scrolling, getting a glass or two of wine, complaining, yelling, or shutting down. Rather, we can show them healthy, effective ways to cope with stress.

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4 CHAPTER

HOPES & GOALS &
AMBITIONS

**FOR EVERY KID, A
TRANSITION NEEDS
TO HAPPEN. FROM
YOUR HOPES FOR
THEM TO THEIR
OWN AMBITIONS.**



Likely, you have expectations for your kid(s) this upcoming year. Between school achievement and taking more responsibility for themselves, every parent ultimately wants their kid to take initiative and ownership of their own lives.

We hope our values, priorities, and expectations get transferred to them and become internal drivers.

But that's way easier said than done.

The last thing we want is to be at constant odds with our kids. We don't want to be the ones to drive them to get their homework done, nag them about cleaning up their rooms or prod them along to get ready for school on time.

The magic solution is a mixture of allowing them to experience natural consequences, surrendering our own anxiety, and guiding them to consider their goals and ambitions.

NATURAL CONSEQUENCES - When your kid forgets to bring their binder to school (their lunch, their signed permission slip, or their P.E. uniform), as parents, most of us have the instant reaction to save the day. We don't want our kids to be without, and we certainly don't appreciate any negative reflection on us as disorganized or irresponsible.

But, if you've laid out clear expectations for them and supported them appropriately and they still forget something—nothing will wake a kid up quicker than some good old-fashioned natural consequences. Let them feel the weight of forgetfulness, or hunger, or embarrassment, or anxiety, and watch how they make adjustments internally to be a bit more responsible and mature.

ANXIETY- Feeling anxious for our kids and their future is normal. What if they never figure out how to take care of themselves? What if they never find any internal drive or motivation? What if they get stuck as video game addicts?

Paying attention to your parental anxiety is important. Learning to be mindful of it so that you can figure out what to do with it is a critical piece of making wise choices as parents.

But don't allow your anxiety for their future to get in the way of giving them the experiences they need to grow up. As parenting expert author Shefali Tsabury says, kids need multiple opportunities to "feel, fail, and fall." Rescuing them from those uncomfortable experiences might be helpful to them in the short term but not for long-term growth.

Becoming a life coach to your kid

COACHING - As our kids become teenagers and head towards adulthood, they need life coaching just as much as they need nurturing and coordination support. A good life coach doesn't direct someone towards specific goals. Rather, they create the space for the other person to discover their own goals and then urge and nudge them with accountability to pursue them.

What does your kid want this year—academically, socially, and in terms of their overall mental health? Allow them to reflect and articulate their hopes, goals, and ambitions for the year, and then be the one to remind them what's most important to them.

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5 CHAPTER

MAKE A PLAN &
STICK TO THE PLAN

BEFORE SCHOOL STARTS, COMMIT TO A SIMPLE SYSTEM TO COMMUNICATE WELL



The families who seem to do more than survive busy, chaotic seasons have one thing in common: clear communication.

- *Some families swear by a family calendar.*
- *Others have mandatory family meetings.*
- *Other strong families use technology apps to communicate together throughout the day and week.*

They're committed to a system and structure to plan, coordinate, and review their commitments. Systems and structures reduce stress and anxiety for everyone because there are fewer surprises and better planning.

They're also willing to flex and adapt. Every family gets overwhelmed from time to time, and some people within the family have extraordinary circumstances. That's why it's helpful within your system and structure to be committed to flex and adapt. There might be weekends when you need to cancel all of your plans and head to the beach instead of the soccer tournament. Or you might need to call your kid in sick for a day or two, so they can catch up on sleep and see a therapist. You might need to quit that volunteer position or put it on hold for a few months.

Make it your aim to stick together, listen to, lean on, and rally together.

IT'S TIME TO GO BACK-TO-SCHOOL!

We hope this Back-to-School Field Guide has been helpful to you and your family as you make the transition to one of the busiest and most stressful times of the year. It's also an exciting time of opportunity and growth for everyone.

We want to support you and your family to thrive this year, so be on the lookout for free resources like webinars and workshops. Also, we have specific resources to offer your family from the YouSchool- see below.

THE PARENT MEMBERSHIP

In our experience, parents and guardians don't have much extra time or bandwidth to get away for focused training. So, we created an ongoing virtual resource that guides you step-by-step to emotional intelligence mastery for yourself and your kids.



We send you a relevant topic and accompanying discussion guide every week. You can use these topics and discussion questions in the car (hello, captive audience!), at the dinner table, or on a walk together. Consider it a field guide for engaging and training your kids in uncommon emotional intelligence.



Also, we have a virtual training course called Raising Well. It's nine learn-by-doing modules with conversation guides and reflection worksheets to align your parenting to your values.

THE PARENT MEMBERSHIP



And, we're offering monthly live (and recorded) training webinars, with topics like:

- Understanding Transitions and Stress
- Understanding friendships and cultivating social skills
- 5:1 Adults
- Cultivating Gratitude
- Building Resilience: Family Narrative
- Expanding Boundaries
- Conflict Skills
- Tech
- A Strengths-Based Family
- Transitioning to Summer



BONUS: WE'LL SEND YOU WEEKLY PODCASTS, AS WELL AS OUR FOR THE SAKE OF KIDS VIRTUAL TRAINING SERIES (IN CASE YOU WANT TO WORK DIRECTLY WITH KIDS OUTSIDE OF YOUR FAMILY), AND WEEKLY ARTICLES ON THE CRITICAL FOUNDATIONS EVERY KID NEEDS.

If you're a YMCA member, use promo code SDYMCA to take 20% off the \$15/month membership



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