

Beaches to Backpacks

Transitioning Our Families Into Autumn

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It's that time again – time to put away the beach gear and pick up the backpacks, trading the slow, long days of summer for a quicker pace. Some things we mourn, some we look forward to, but no doubt back-to-school is a big transition for both children



and their support cast, us parents. As we gather our families together to begin the school year again, how can we hold onto the gems of summer while embracing the happy activity of autumn?

The year has its rhythm, and even the animals outside our windows are moving faster, collecting nuts and seeds, building warm nests, and using the shortening days as efficiently as they can. And so it goes with us. Back to school, back to work, alarm clocks, homework, packing lunches, carpools, school supplies, parent meetings, and afterschool activities - all those moving parts! We, too, are compelled to gather speed and join the natural forces. But as we engage in our full lives, let's make sure to save time for family and stay refreshed. Here are some ideas that may help the transition go a little more smoothly.

- In the beginning, be a patient guide. To make the shift to the fall schedule, be aware of the intensity of all those transitions for children, and leave extra time! Remember that *faster* doesn't mean *more* with kids, and you'll often get into the car in less time if you *slow down*. Until they know what to expect at each step in the day, they rely on us to preview and be present. We are like their ambassadors in a new land. New teachers, new routines, new bedtimes, new classmates, new expectations.... Wow! If they are

resisting, they are probably overwhelmed and need reassurance. After a few weeks of out-the-door-in-the-morning, everyone will know what to expect, and the rough bumps will smooth over. But in the beginning, stay close and plan to do less.

- **Let the schedule breathe.** Think “balance.” If you look at your electronic calendar and everything’s overlapping and there isn’t any white space, you’re in trouble. While the little white lines look like they’re waiting to be filled, please understand that if you let them guide you, eventually you *will* try to drive out of the garage forgetting to raise the garage door, or end up feeding the family dry cereal and pickles for dinner. And if being crazy-busy does that to us parents, just imagine what it’s like to be an overscheduled eight-year-old. After a long day at school with lots of big people giving directions and homework still to come, ask yourself whether you’d really want to go to *all* of those afterschool activities? Even if an activity is fun in and of itself, do what your child’s brain is as yet incapable of, and think in terms of the whole picture of her day, her week, the activity level in her life, and figure out which activities are most important. Seek to balance busy mornings with relaxed afternoons, stimulating days with quieter ones.

- **Make routines routine.** Repetition can be freeing. When something has to be done every day, think about it less, talk about it less, and just do it the same way every time. Train your children to do things automatically. A great way to achieve this is to tie what needs to be done, like a chore, to whatever repeatedly comes before it, like dinner dishes after dinner, instrument practice after kitchen cleanup, bedtime story and song after bath. This saves debate and precious brain activity, and leaves more time for connection.

- **Save the summer gems.** Pick one thing you loved to do with your kids over the summer and work it into your week. You probably won’t have as much time, but you can shoot for a scaled version of the things that meant the most to you. Like if you really enjoyed those walks you took every night after dinner with the whole family, then take a walk at least once a week. If you had

a great vegetable garden, then get the children involved in planning the garden for next year, one package of seeds at a time. If you savored that time “just hanging” together, then put up a force field every so often and *just hang*. Don’t fall into the trap of thinking it’s extravagant to spend time on the things you enjoy together; it’s what makes your family *your family*.

- **Gather the family for dinner.** We know it, everyone says family dinners work magic, and the cliché is true - they do. We are social creatures, and sharing food together is our nature and our good fortune. This is a perfect time to be together as a family, without an agenda beyond nourishment and pleasure, and the conversation that comes with that is irreplaceable. How else will you get to hear what Timmy said to your daughter when Alice tried to throw a container of milk to James but James missed it and it exploded? Many gifts come of your children knowing that you’re fully present, sharing their feelings of satisfaction in a good meal, and that they can count on the community of family at the end of the day.
- **Get lots of sleep.** Leave way more time for sleep than you are tempted to. Children need a solid 10-12 hours to feel good, perform well in school, be socially resilient, and grow. And yes, parents need sleep too. While it’s tempting to use those late-night hours when the rest of the house is quiet to catch up on your to-do list, or just relax and kick back, you know you’ll feel it in the morning when you’re responsible for the world again.
- **Let sports be fun.** Not more work. Find a good balance of sports involvement in your house that lets everyone enjoy the game rather than becoming another burden in the busy schedule. This might mean doing less or compromising when your child comes up with a plan to play three sports at once, and you know you can’t possibly drive him everywhere without cloning yourself or hiring a driver. There’s enough work involved in their school and your job, not to mention cleaning out the garage and doing laundry, without inviting more in the guise of a game. So make sure when your child’s out there on the playing field, there are

smiles mixed in with the striving – smiles that are reflected in you as well.

- **Celebrate successes!** Notice what you've managed to create in your family life and don't take it for granted. Have time in the evening to play a game of cards with your son? Managed family dinner most nights in the week? Got out of the house with your children in the morning, laughing not yelling? Fit in a workout class for yourself and got a good night's sleep? Nice going! Find time to reflect on your choices and appreciate your heart-felt commitment and creativity. **And remember, it's not really about doing *more* or *better*; it's about attuning your lives with what matters most and trusting in the nourishment that comes from that.**