

# Back-to-school is back!

New friends, new teachers, new routines—making the transition from the lazy days of summer to the school year is chaotic for your kids *and* for you. Get back into the swing of things with fresh ideas from fellow REDBOOK moms who've been there, done that.

## Get your kids psyched!

■ “Two weeks before school begins, I print up small posters with numbers counting down the days, and my kids help me decorate them. On certain days I have events planned—14 days to go is school shopping day, 12 days to go is a special craft project, 10 days to go is an outing to the amusement park, eight days to go is a visit to the library to get a book for the school year, and so on. With all the fun anticipation, the kids get increasingly excited for the big day to finally arrive.”

Jacqueline Mellor, 44, Casselberry, FL;  
mother to Brandon, 24, Cameron, 20, and Dylan, 11

■ “The week leading up to the first day, I help my kids get in the mood by reading books about going back to school. My favorite is *First Day Jitters*, by Julie Danneberg, which follows a girl as she's getting ready, but we can't see her face. She's really anxious, wondering what it will be like and if people will like her, and at the end we learn the girl is actually a teacher! It just goes to show that everyone gets a bit nervous about the first day of school.”

Aviva Patz, 38, Montclair, NJ;  
mother to Sadie, 6, and Dahlia, 4

■ “I talk with my daughters about how the start of a school year is about new beginnings, new friends, and new opportunities. My oldest will be starting fifth grade this year, so we discussed how it's a great chance for her to let her personality shine through in the new surroundings. I encourage her to approach the new year with a big smile—it's a small thing, but it really does instill her with confidence. When my younger one started at a new school, I told her to walk in like a princess, with grace, confidence, and courage; those words alone were enough to get her excited.”

J'Anmetra Burgess, 33, Raleigh, NC;  
mother to Kourtney, 11, and Rosmound, 4

■ “I talk to my children about all the new things they'll get to do for the first time now that they're entering the next grade. My oldest is starting middle school and will have his first locker, which is a big deal for him, so we're talking about buying a cool lock and other accessories for it.”

Jeanette Dominguez, 39, El Paso, TX;  
mother to Noah, 10, Jewel, 6, and Jeremy, 6

■ “My daughter is really social and loves meeting new people, so I make the transition from summer to school easier by reminding her that she'll be seeing all of her old friends and making new ones. We also talk about all the craft projects she'll get to do—we look over old projects hanging on the fridge and on the wall, and we reminisce about when she made them in past classes. Her eyes get really big, and I can tell she's getting excited for the first day.”

Heather Mullins, 30, Coeburn, VA;  
mother to Jaylen Mae Nicola, 6





## Get yourself ready

■ “The start of the school year means having to fill out an infinite number of forms—emergency contacts, PTA sign-up, and medical information. And even though all my kids attend public school, I have to write checks for school photos, supplies, athletic participation, field trips, and more—it’s daunting! To handle it, I commit to spending one morning filling out all of the paperwork. I make the process less painful by treating myself to a nice cup of coffee and something sweet, like a muffin or a scone.”

Kris Gaustad, 43, Riverside, IL;  
mother to Kelly, 19, Kayla, 16, and Ava, 4

■ “There’s not much preparation necessary because I’m usually excited for back-to-school: For the first time in months I’ll have some peace and quiet—no loud, arguing children around! But when I’m feeling weighed down anticipating all the forms I’ll have to fill out, plus getting my reluctant kids back into school mode, a little retail therapy always helps. It’s mostly for the kids—we go out and buy new clothes and backpacks, and it’s fun for me, too!”

Karen Schiff Freeman, 37, Solon, OH;  
mother to Rebecca, 13, Jarrett, 10, and Lexi, 7



■ “In order to carve the most family time out of each day, I make a conscious effort to be efficient with tasks and chores: I wake up early to make the kids’ lunches, I get to work earlier so I can make it home earlier and get dinner prepared at a decent hour. I also run errands during my lunch break so I can head straight home at the end of the day and be with the family. I want my sons to grow up remembering the fun times they had with us throughout their childhood, even if it’s just cooking dinner together or lounging around the living room watching movies. Family time is precious.”

Unique Vasquez, 24, Tacoma, WA;  
mother of Jeff, 8, Jonas, 7, and Julias, 5 months

## Teachers’ top tips for starting the year off right

**KEEP IN TOUCH.** Parent contact is the key to a child’s success, so keep the lines of communication open. “Let us know how to reach you,” says Natasha Johns, a fourth-grade teacher in Bedford, IN. “Is email best? Should we never call you at work? We need this info so we can be in touch.”

**FILL THEM IN.** It’s better for teachers to know too much about your child than not enough. “Tell us about medical issues and any matter that might affect mood or behavior, like the death of a pet,” says Joan Rice, a teacher in South Milwaukee, WI, and coauthor of *What Kindergarten Teachers Know*.

**GET INVOLVED (BUT NOT TOO INVOLVED).** It’s helpful when you stay up-to-date on classroom notes and events. “Be present by volunteering to help out in the class and by asking us how you might reinforce school lessons at home,” says Rice. And to avoid overstepping, she suggests, “stay focused on your own child’s development, rather than on that of the other kids.”

**BRING THE LESSONS HOME.** Help your child keep learning when he’s at home by creating an environment that reflects the attitude that school is important. “Establish consistent routines—a place to study, a place to keep materials, and a quiet time each evening devoted to schoolwork,” says Rice.

**SHOW SOME TRUST!** “Just as you trust the dentist to know how to pull your tooth, realize that we’re specialists in educating your child,” says Tammy Wawro, a facilitator for new teachers in Cedar Rapids, IA. “So back us up and believe that we’re here because we care about your child’s success.”

■ “Our school hosts a ‘First Day,’ when the kids get to go see their classroom and meet their new teacher. It’s also a good chance for me to meet the teacher, get a feel for him or her, and start a dialogue that will continue through the school year. This face-to-face conversation reassures me that if I have questions or problems, I can feel comfortable approaching the teacher.”

Tamara Grundwalski, 36, Plainfield, CT;  
mother to Derek, 8, and Lauren, 5

■ “I get anxious about my son beginning a new grade, so I chat with fellow moms so that we can share our angst, vent, and trade tips. As a single widowed mom, I find it helpful to use other parents as sounding boards. We talk about whether or not our kids should take the bus, how much homework they might get, and who we should talk to at school if our kids have problems. Talking these things out makes me realize that every parent has similar concerns about their kids, and when we share them I often realize that many of them are kind of silly, and I’m able to laugh at myself.”

Simma Lieberman, 58, Albany, CA; mother to Avi, 14

# Make the first day memorable



■ “I get up early and make a real home-cooked breakfast, and then I pack a special lunch with some little surprise for the kids to find at lunch. And despite increasing protests as they get older, we always snap pictures of them.”

Sue George, 50, Lexington, KY; mother to Shannon, 20, Stephanie, 14, and Peter, 11

■ “Each year, I make a new page for my son’s school scrapbook. I include photos of him on the first day, plus other info such as his height, weight, and shoe size.

One year, I put in shots of him cutting off his ‘summer ‘fro’ the night before the first day. It’s fun to

look back and observe how he’s grown and see the various Catholic-school uniforms over the years. As he’s gotten older, he’s become less tolerant of this ritual, but I remind him that I’m determined to do it until his senior year—I’ve even threatened to stalk him on campus for his first day of college!”

Cara Largoza, 35, Bloomfield, NJ; mother to Justin, 13

■ “For my son’s first-day lunch, I cut his sandwich in a funny shape, cover the packaging of the snacks in cool stickers, and include a note from his father and me. In the evening, we all go out to ice cream and share stories from the day. I think it’s so important to start off with a positive, excited attitude, because it sets the tone for the rest of the year.”

Aubrey Ringleb, 30, Tulsa, OK; mother to Bennett, 3, and Jameson, 4 months

■ “I have a tradition with my kids that we always go out to a restaurant of their choice for dinner on their first day of school. It’s hard to end vacation, start waking up early, and face the homework, so at least the kids get a fun night out on that first day.”

Heather McMenamin, 33, Staten Island, NY; mother to Cherokee, 14, and Jessie, 12

## School-night dinner solutions

With homework to complete and after-school commitments to attend to (not to mention trying to squeeze in a little time for you), weeknights are beyond hectic, so it's no surprise that family dinner often falls by the wayside. To help you reclaim that time together at the table, REDBOOK has partnered with Dream Dinners, a national retail chain that offers you everything you need to make a delicious and nutritious meal for your family.



**HERE'S HOW IT WORKS:** Go to [dreamdinners.com](http://dreamdinners.com) to select the entrées you'd like to make and book an appointment at your local Dream Dinners storefront (there are more than 200 in 34 states; check [dreamdinners.com](http://dreamdinners.com)), where you'll assemble the ingredients for meals that can be frozen and served whenever you'd like. It costs around \$240 for a 12-meal series—about \$20 per meal for six people. And during September, you'll be able to make Country Chicken With Apples, a recipe developed exclusively for Dream Dinners by REDBOOK.



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