

GREAT LAKES FAMILY

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Ready... Set.... September!

by Kristy Zeluff

My morning glories are not even blooming yet, and September is looming large on the horizon. If your family is anything like ours, preparing to resume the school year schedule is like girding for battle. The keys to it all? Organize, simplify, streamline.

Easing the morning madness: Ideas to get your crew out the door on time.

Identify your top trouble areas. Take some time to really examine your former routines and identify chronic problems that make everyone late. My oldest daughter and I used to boil up over clothing choices almost every day until we made one simple change: clothes for the next day must be set out at bedtime the night before. As a general rule, making sure as much of what you need for the following day is ready at bedtime lessens the morning scramble.

Choose your battles wisely. Recognize that everyone has a finite amount of time in the morning, and decide what is vital. Brushing the teeth? Non-negotiable. Beds made? Well, will it really change your life?

Save rewards for after the routine. Make sure the television, computer and PlayStation stay off until your child is 100 percent ready to walk out the door. This means having everything they need – jackets, shoes, book bag, lunch – immediately at hand or on.

...and everything in its place. That scattered kid who routinely forgets his lunch probably drops his book bag in an astonishing variety of places. It will take reminders, but work to establish a single area where all shoes, bags and jackets need to land as soon as the kids walk through the door. This will help prevent those maddening last minute searches the following morning.

Making the most of your time: Planning the family schedule.

Just say "No!" to over-scheduling. If you follow family news and issues, one consistent message prevails: Slow down! Instead of trying to figure out how to fit it all in, decide whether or not you *should*.

Post a visible schedule with room for reminders. Devote some wall space to a white board big enough to record everyone's "things to remember" for each day of the week, and then get everyone in the habit of checking it regularly. This can be used both for reoccurring events (Tuesday: Lexi wear shoes for gym) and easily overlooked appointments (Wednesday: Kate

dentist 10:30 a.m.).

Know when to ask for help, and when to offer it. Be proactive about finding ways to minimize your kid-running duties. Chances are good that your child's best friend's mom is on a similar circuit, so see if you can pick up for her on Mondays if she returns the favor on Wednesdays – even one day a week off for Mom's taxi can help ease scheduling issues.

Your child's daily dose of "ZZZ": Establishing good sleep habits

How important is sleep? When choosing your battles, this one may be more vital than you know. We've all seen misbehavior from a tired kid, but over time chronic partial sleep deprivation – missing one or two hours of needed sleep each night – can depress the immune system and even stunt your child's growth.

According to Amy Stahl, a registered polysomnographic sleep technologist with the Kalamazoo Sleep Center, kids need about 10 hours of sleep each day, though of course this varies from child to child. "I tell my patients that they need to establish good 'sleep hygiene,'" Stahl says. Consider these tips:

Go caffeine-free. Avoid giving your child caffeinated beverages or chocolate, especially within four to six hours of bedtime.

Establish consistent bedtimes and stick to them, even on the weekends. Those late night soirees on the weekend can impact your kids well into the school week. As much as possible, keep to the same bedtimes on the weekends and throughout the year. This position will not make you popular, but it could have a major impact on the health and well being of your entire family.

Recognize the signs of partial sleep deprivation in children. Parents can miss the signs of partial sleep deprivation in children simply because they can be different from what we as adults experience. Stahl says to watch for kids falling asleep in front of the TV and irritable, erratic behavior, but she also points out that a tired child may be more rambunctious and hyper than usual. This can mislead parents into thinking that their child is nowhere near ready for sleep, when in fact they are desperate for it.

Out-of-the-box thinking for school lunches: Beyond PBJ.

Food – another one of those parental battlefields where you do the very best you can then hang on for the ride.

If they won't eat it, don't pack it. Your hot dog aficionado is not going to abruptly change his stripes when faced with a veggie stuffed pita. Remember that changes to your child's diet should take place gradually over time rather than in one fell swoop. Pick one area to work on first, such as eliminating soft drinks, and count your successes one improvement at a time.

Try to improve on what they already like. If your child is devoted to the standard lunch fare of sandwich and accompaniments, try to boost the

nutritional value of what they already eat. Trade white bread for wheat, and then move to whole grain varieties. Instead of chips, pack a small handful of walnuts or pecans. Pack yogurt or fruit cups instead of pudding.

Mara Melbardis, a registered dietitian with Bronson Nutrition Services, has some great suggestions, both specifically for packed lunches and when considering your kids' diets in general.

Ask for your kids' input. Melbardis says to ask your kids to list the top three things they would like to see in their lunches. Gaining their input means you are less likely to see that sandwich squashed into the corner of their lunchbox when they come home from school.

Check out what everyone else is eating. One of the hot trends with the lunchbox set is tortilla rollups, says Melbardis. Small tortillas are available in the dairy section, and come in a wide variety of flavors, including health-conscious whole wheat. Even PBJ is more interesting when you roll it into a tortilla, but you can use these tortillas to wrap up just about anything.

Try to avoid processed foods, and pump up the dairy. As much as possible, stick with fresh produce and unprocessed meats, and don't skimp on the dairy. "So few kids get enough dairy," Melbardis says. She suggests parents can check out the new yogurt smoothies or even make their own, either of which can be frozen overnight then packed in a regular lunch box. She also suggests cheese as a lunchbox staple.

Harnessing the power of dip. Send a plain bag of carrots and chances are good they'll hit the trashcan every time. Add ranch dressing to dip them in and you get a different story. "The benefits from the fresh vegetables outweigh the drawbacks of the ranch dressing," Melbardis says. They cost a little more, but in many produce sections you can find individually sized portions of ranch dressing that are perfect to pack in a lunch. Try peanut butter with apples, or vanilla yogurt with grapes.

Good old H2O. One of Melbardis's top concerns about our kids' collective diets is that they rarely drink enough water. With the dizzying array of sodas, sports drinks and juices marketed specifically to kids, this can seem like an uphill battle, but it is one worth fighting. Resolve to become a broken record on this topic, and exercise your will power at the grocery store. If soda or juices are not readily available, most kids will naturally turn to what is, namely milk or water. Fight hard to establish good habits while your kids are young, so when they are older and have easier access, they might make better choices.

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