



# 2017

## Ultimate Back-to-School Guide



Inside:  
**12 stories**  
with tips for  
parents,  
kids

# Helping your child prepare to learn

*By Shelly Reese*



The dog days of summer are waning.

For students – and their parents – that means returning to the schedule and structure of school year routines.

What can you do to help prime your child’s brain for a successful return to school? [Dr. Meghan Markovich](#), a pediatrician with St. Elizabeth Physicians, offers these tips:

**1. Practice your routine.** Chances are your summer schedule is vastly different from your school year drill. [Take a couple weeks](#) to inch your way back to your routine sleep and wake patterns. If your kids have gotten accustomed to lounging in their jammies all morning, this is a good time to relearn the habit of waking to an alarm and getting dressed. These practices may seem like a late summer killjoy, but they will reduce some back-to-school stress and help ensure your child is well-rested when the first bell rings.

**2. Reduce uncertainty.** [Uncertainty is stressful for kids](#). Encourage them to talk about their worries and do what you can to reduce uncertainty. Many schools offer children a chance to meet their teachers, visit their classrooms or pick up their schedules before school begins. If your child is nervous about returning to school, take advantage of these opportunities. If she hasn’t seen her school buddies much over the summer, invite a few over for an end-of-summer get together. Reintroducing familiar faces will help her feel more comfortable and excited for the coming year.

**3. Food for fuel.** Nutrition has a huge impact on brain function both in the immediate term and over the course of an individual’s life. Sadly, popsicles are not brain food. If your family’s dietary habits have slipped a little over the summer, now’s a good time to get back on the nutritional bandwagon. That’s especially true when it comes to breakfast.

“When a child skips breakfast they don’t have any fuel in their tank. When they start the day with a donut or sugary cereal, their blood sugar will spike, then fall, leaving them with less energy. A nutritious breakfast has been shown to improve concentration and even behavior in school,” Markovich says. “A healthy breakfast consisting of fresh fruits, whole grains, and lean protein – such as a glass of skim milk or a boiled egg – will give them the energy they need to carry them through to lunch time.”

Psst ... Check out these [quick breakfast recipes](#) for the morning rush.

**4. Respect your child’s individuality.** Going back to school can trigger a range of sometimes contradictory emotions in a child and different children will respond to the situation in varying ways. Watch your child’s signals. Your diligent daughter may head straight to her desk ready to jump into her homework, but your fidgety son may need some run-around time in the backyard first as well as a little kitchen-table supervision while he does his homework, especially at the beginning of the year. “What works best for one child doesn’t necessarily suit another. Try to help your child develop the work habits that best suit his or her age and personality.”

**5. Get plenty of sleep.** Back to school can be physically and emotionally draining. Try to make sure the whole family is getting enough sleep.

Above all, be patient with your kids and yourself. No matter how much you prepare, something is likely to go awry: a lunch forgotten, a form lost, a deadline missed. Roll with it. “Back to school doesn’t last forever,” Markovich says. “Getting into a routine early will help everyone, and winter vacation will be here before you know it.”

# The importance of keeping a schedule

*By Colleen Weinkam*

If you have a child who is misbehaving, you might want to hold off on calling the teacher and instead take a look at your son's or daughter's schedule.

The beginning of the school year can bring plenty of opportunities to throw off your child's schedule – later-than-expected visit at a friend's house, for instance, or an extracurricular activity that runs over – and while it's not the end of the world to get off track once in awhile, a consistent lack of a schedule can lead to big problems.

A 2013 study by the American Academy of Pediatrics' *Pediatrics* journal found that kids with irregular sleep are more likely to have lower scores on tests that measure their ability to problem solve, and higher rates of hyperactivity, emotional difficulties and problems dealing with peers.



Researchers found that the effects of poor sleep increase as kids age, but that the effects *are* reversible. Once children in the study began going to sleep at a regular time each night, their behavior improved.

"Sleep allows the brain to reset and refresh, which is necessary for all humans no matter their age," said Gail Rizzo, child and family counselor at St. Elizabeth Healthcare.

Although setting a routine and sticking to it can be hard, you will see a difference. Kids will be less anxious if they're typically anxious, less tired if they're typically tired and their behavioral issues will lessen.

"Having a schedule helps your child feel more secure because they know what to expect," Rizzo said.

And the schedule doesn't have to be outrageously rigid either.

To start, make a commitment to try out a routine for a month to six weeks. Set a basic outline for coming home, doing homework, having dinner and going to bed. If you have two kids who have different bedtimes – such as one who's older and one who's younger – it may mean sharing parenting duties.

"Families should work together to establish a sleep routine," Rizzo said. "A child will feel more empowered if he gets to be a part of developing the schedule and will be more likely to agree to it."

# It's time for back-to-school immunizations



*By Colleen Weinkam*

With back to school right around the corner, you probably have “visit the pediatrician’s office” on your list of things to do in the next few weeks if your child is going into kindergarten or sixth grade.

That’s because most schools require vaccinations around those ages for your child to be admitted, said [Dr. John LaCount](#), a pediatrician with [St. Elizabeth Physicians’ Florence office](#).

The biggest push is for kids just entering school, he said.

Vaccinations from birth through 4 years prevent against diseases such as measles and pertussis ([whooping cough](#)), both of which have seen a record number of cases in recent years.



According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), the United States saw 667 cases of measles in 2014 – the highest number of cases since measles was declared eliminated in the United States in 2000. In 2012, 48,277 cases of pertussis were reported in the United States – the largest number of cases reported in the United States since 1955.

[Click here to download a chart illustrating the vaccinations recommended by the CDC for children ages 0 to 6.](#) (Source: CDC)

Once your child is school-aged, he or she likely won’t need another vaccination until around sixth grade, LaCount said, although an exception to this

rule is the flu vaccine, which is required yearly from 6 months on. Another exception is if your family is new to the country or will be traveling out of the country.

Right around sixth grade, though, kids begin to require vaccinations against diseases including tetanus, human papillomavirus and meningitis, LaCount said.

And, tetanus vaccinations are recommended every 10 years, so many people will require another tetanus shot around age 20 or 21, even after they age out of the pediatrician’s office.

[Click here for a chart illustrating the vaccinations recommended by the CDC for children ages 7 to 18.](#) (Source: CDC)

The bottom line, LaCount said, is that [vaccines are the best way to protect your children from disease](#), so make sure they’re up to date.

“Despite the controversy around vaccine safety, we try to dissuade families from opting out,” he said. “It’s a combination of herd immunity and individual immunity that keeps these diseases under control.”

# 5 things you can do to get your child ready for kindergarten

By Colleen Weinkam



There's a secret about early literacy that Amy Schardein, early childhood librarian with the Kenton County Public Library, wishes more people knew: It's simple and anyone – even parents who are illiterate or low literate themselves – can help their child get ready to read.

According to Schardein, it's not important if kids go into kindergarten knowing how to read; what's important is that they're ready to learn. To prepare them, here are five things you can do with your child every day:

**1. Read:** This one is a no-brainer, but read to your child every day. It doesn't have to just be before bed either. You can read to them in the checkout line of the grocery store, when they're in the bathtub, or when you're just relaxing and sitting on the couch together.

Also, "one important thing we're learning about reading to children is that they do better when we interact with them about the book," Schardein said.

That means ask your child questions about why something happened or point out a detail and expand on what he or she says: "Children get much more out of a book when you create a discussion around the book," Schardein said.

**2. Play:** Although any kind of play is beneficial for children, pretend play is the best kind of play, Schardein said.

"When kids can create their own story and act it out, it's really important for social and emotional health," she said.

It also helps kids learn how to work out issues and disagreements on their own.

**3. Write:** Writing for young children doesn't mean worksheets or even writing letters and numbers. It means giving your child access to writing utensils – whether that be crayons, construction paper, markers, etc.

"Young children benefit from experimenting with writing materials," Schardein said. "It also helps them build fine motor skills. As they get older, you can give them letters to trace."

**4. Talk:** Children need you to speak with them – a lot – every single day, Schardein said. Just talking to them helps them develop their own language. And the same doesn't hold true for words they hear on TV or other devices. It has to be a live human.

"Think about it," she said. "If you've ever tried to sound out a word that you haven't heard before, isn't it so much harder than sounding out a word you have heard before?"

Also, sometimes, we can be tired and what we say to our kids can be short, such as the clipped commands "please don't," "stop," or "no." But full sentences are much more beneficial to children, so try to be chatty.

**5. Sing:** Singing helps children because when we sing, we assign a different note to each syllable, and those changes in note and pitch help children hear smaller parts of each word, which will help them later with reading.

Preparing your child to learn to read doesn't have to be difficult. Just remember to read, play, write, talk and sing with them. And, if you want to do more, take him or her to a story time or preschool program at the library, but don't be alarmed when you realize the kids there aren't quietly listening to a book: "Parents are sometimes surprised by how much talking there is during story time, but it's so much better for the kids," Schardein said.

# 3 tips to ward off back-to-school germs



*By Colleen Weinkam*

For many parents, what's often touted as the most wonderful time of the year – back-to-school – can turn into the worst time of the year when visits to the pediatrician's office start stacking up.

"It happens pretty much every year," said [Dr. John La Count](#), a pediatrician with St. Elizabeth Physicians' Florence office. "Kids are in school for a week and then a week or so later, they're coming in to see us for colds and coughs and infections."

Protecting your kids from as many germs as possible while they're off at school and out from under your watchful eye doesn't have to be difficult, though.

There are three mantras you should start teaching your kids now to keep the pediatrician at bay:



**1. Wash your hands:** If you want to protect your kids from strep throat and other common infections, this is the No. 1 rule to teach them, La Count said. Kids should wash their hands before eating and after using the bathroom. Hand sanitizers and other gels also will do the trick in most cases, but they aren't as effective as soap and water with certain bacterial or viral infections, particularly stomach bugs. "You need to be really careful to make sure your kids are washing their hands with soap and water if a stomach bug is going around and not just with gel," La Count said.

**2. Don't touch your eyes, nose or mouth:** Kids run the risk of infecting themselves when they touch open areas like the eyes, nose and mouth if their hands aren't clean, La Count said, so it's best to avoid it entirely if possible.

**3. Be prepared for class:** This one isn't as intuitive, but if kids have the proper supplies out and ready when in the classroom, they won't have to borrow from other kids, which "decreases the likelihood of being on the receiving end of transferred germs," La Count said.

Unfortunately, this one works both ways. "As much as you don't want to tell kids not to share, sharing drinks, utensils, pencils and paper can transfer their germs to other kids, as well," La Count said.

Remember these three rules before sending your kids off to the bus stop and you should cut down on your trips to the doctor's office, which is what your pediatrician wants, too.

# Do your kids need an eye exam?

By Rory Glynn



August finds many parents in a flurry of back-to-school activity. But between buying backpacks, pencils, clothes and shoes, you'd be wise to remember something else your child may need: an eye exam.

This month also marks Children's Eye Health and Safety Month, and it's a great time to make sure your kids will be seeing the chalkboard or whiteboard or smartboard as well as they should.

"Periodic eye exams are an important part of any child's routine health care," said Dr. Michael Wehmann of [St. Elizabeth Physicians Ophthalmology Fort Thomas](#). "The visual system is not fully mature at birth, and many children are able to function well even with developing problems in one eye. These can go unnoticed at times."

## When should your child have an eye exam?

The American Optometric Association recommends children have their first eye exams at around six months, again at three years, before entering first grade (six years) and every two years thereafter. Children considered at risk for eye or vision problem, including prematurity and/or low birth weight or a family history of congenital cataracts or retinoblastoma, should be tested more frequently.

"If some problems are not identified and treated at a young age, the vision in one eye can develop poorly and never reach its full potential for vision in life," Wehmann said. "This is called amblyopia, and it is commonly associated with a crossed or 'lazy' eye; however, sometimes the eyes can appear totally normal to parents and pediatricians. A full pediatric eye exam can identify a child's previously unnoticed refractive error and give them better vision as they grow during the important years of early reading and interacting with people."



When scheduling an eye exam, it's important to remember there are different professional practitioners.

- Ophthalmologists are medical doctors who specialize in eye and vision care and complete eight years of medical training after college. Ophthalmologists diagnose and treat diseases of the eye and can prescribe medicines and perform surgeries.
- Optometrists provide primary vision care, including eye testing, and diagnose, treat and manage changes in vision. Optometrists are doctors of optometry, not medical doctors; their practices focus on eye and vision testing, prescribing and selling corrective lenses, and prescribing some medications.
- Opticians focus on corrective lenses, eyeglasses and contacts. They do not test vision or write prescriptions, or diagnose eye diseases.

# 8 after-school snacks your kids will actually eat

By *SmartHealthToday Team*



When I was in grade school, I remember getting off the bus, running into the house and making a beeline for the kitchen. I mean, my lunch time was often before 11 a.m. so when I got home, I was ready to eat anything I could get my hands on!

Sometimes that meant a giant ice cream sundae, sometimes it was half a bag of potato chips. Fruit and veggies were always available, but if they were not cut up and staring me in the face, forget about it.

As I got older, I learned a lot of nutrition lessons from these early snacking tendencies. Specifically, the importance of making healthy food choices, portion size and pre-planning.

First, let's look at some healthy after-school snack ideas:

- **Single serving containers of low-fat yogurt or cottage cheese**
- **Whole grain crackers and low-fat cheese**
- **Grapes or unsweetened applesauce cups or pouches and a string cheese**
- **Low-sugar granola bar (10 grams of sugar or less) and a glass of fat-free or low-fat milk**
- **Banana or apple and a tablespoon of peanut butter**
- **Air-popped popcorn sprinkled with parmesan cheese**
- **Whole wheat English muffin with one slice of deli meat and one slice of low-fat cheese**
- **Baby carrots, cherry tomatoes and bell pepper with low-fat ranch for dipping**



These snack ideas are quick, easy and will provide enough fuel to keep kids satisfied until dinner without going overboard. Some of the ideas pair carbohydrates (apples, crackers, English muffin) with a source of protein (low-fat cheese, deli meat), making the snack more substantial.

Also, eating from a multiple serving container or bag can lead to overeating. Several of the ideas listed are already in controlled portions. The single serving container of yogurt, individually wrapped string cheese, apple and banana are already portioned out and ready to go so there is little chance of overdoing it.

It is not enough to just have these healthy choices in the fridge. Communicate to your kids what is available for after-school snacks.

Take a few minutes to clean and cut up some veggies and fruit when you get home from the store so they are ready for snacks immediately. Put these at a child's eye level in the fridge or on the kitchen counter so these foods are seen immediately when the snack search begins.



# How to choose the right extracurricular activity for your child

*By Colleen Weinkam*

When your kids are young, picking and choosing extracurricular activities is something of a free-for-all. You don't know what they're going to like – and, usually, neither do they – so you sign them up for a few different things and see what sticks.

“It's a great time to let your kids test the water,” said licensed psychologist Suzanne Collins, who works with children and families at [Little Psychological Services](#) in Florence.

It's also a good time to stick with activities with shorter durations, such as a six-week-long soccer season. That way, you have more time to have your child try out a few different things and, if your child doesn't like something, it won't last long.

Once you notice your child starting to enjoy an activity or two more than others, you can start setting some limits, such as telling him or her that playing baseball in the spring means no soccer (at least for that season).

For kids who are shy and aren't acting enthusiastic about participating in a sport or joining a club, it's OK to push a little. In fact, Collins said, it's actually important.

“I strongly recommend extracurricular activities for kids who have some social struggles,” she said. “During the school day, there is some social interaction but not a lot, so for kids struggling to make friends or engage with their peers, extracurricular activities are really the best way.”

You can try enticing your child into anything you think he or she might enjoy, such as a LEGO club, chess club, sewing club or cooking club. It doesn't have to be a sport. And you can use the buddy system as motivation.

“You can tell your child, ‘I know you don't think you want to do this, but your friend Bobby is doing it, so we're just going to try it out with him,’” Collins said. “Giving him or her a comfort level is really important.”

So is giving your child an out and letting him or her know that it's not for life; it's only for a few weeks.

Also, if your child doesn't want to veer from one activity but you'd like him or her to branch out, try keeping the activity he or she wants and adding the one you want, too. “You say, ‘I know you want to do this, but I want you to do this, so let's try both this year and see what you think,’” Collins said.



# Signs your young athlete could be training too much

By Dave Malaska



Sports medicine practitioners have been warning for years that there has been an upswing in the over-training of young athletes. Now, there are stats to back those warnings.

In a recent study by the American Academy of Pediatrics, researchers found nearly half of all injuries seen in pediatric sports medicine are due to overuse. It also found more lingering problems in older teens and young adults attributed to earlier growth plate injuries - injuries that occurred to theft cells at the end of long bones that aren't fully formed and replaced by solid bone until ages 14 to 16 in girls and 16 to 18 in boys.

Here are some indicators your young athlete (or you, for that matter) are over-training:



- Unusual muscle soreness: It's common to have some soreness for a day or two after a tough workout. If that pain lingers after three days, though, it could be a sign that your muscles aren't getting the needed recovery time.
- Constant thirst or feeling sick: Overdoing it at the gym can cause your body to go into a catabolic state - when stress hormones cause your body to break down muscle tissue to fuel its immediate needs instead of the usual nutrients and proteins. A catabolic state naturally causes dehydration and can lower your immunity.
- Insomnia: It seems incongruous, but over-training can lead to bouts of insomnia.
- Behavioral changes: A change in blood chemistry, insomnia and other overtraining effects are most easily noticed in behavior, whether it manifests as depression or aggression.

According to [St. Elizabeth Sports Medicine](#)'s Stacey McConnell, sports medicine doctors have been seeing the anecdotal evidence for years. "We see the overuse injuries, sometimes we see the physiology and biochemistry effects, and we see depressed kids," McConnell said. "We see the whole gamut, and it mostly comes from the pressure to perform."

Whether the pressure is from an outside source – say, a coach or parent or the drive to land college scholarship – or the pressure is self-motivated makes a world of difference.

McConnell said the best thing is to let a young athlete pace himself/herself and not to restrict them to a single sport. Cross-training is the best way to encourage overall health while cutting down on repetitive, overuse injuries. "In cross-training, they're doing all sorts of activities, not focusing on the same movement over and over," he said. "Let your kid be a kid. If they have the gift, the motivation and the right attitude, great. Don't put pressure on them for outside reasons. Let them find their passion."

[SmartHealthToday](#) is a community service provided by St. Elizabeth Healthcare. The health news site has more than 1,300 stories, ranging from Family Health to Wellness to Heart Health.

# 3 tips to relieve test anxiety

*By Colleen Weinkam*

Cold, clammy hands and a racing heartbeat.

That's what test anxiety felt like for me many moons ago when I was in school. Now that I'm a parent, though, I'm trying to figure out how to help my kids manage test anxiety, and avoid the sometimes-crippling fear I felt before tests.

If you've ever experienced test anxiety, you know it's real, and you know it isn't fun. Not only can it make you tense and nervous before a test, it also can lower your performance level.

That's why licensed psychologist Suzanne Collins, who works with children and families in Northern Kentucky, recommends the best place to start when dealing with test anxiety is helping your child be prepared.



"Obviously, there is going to be more anxiety if your kid isn't prepared and really doesn't know the information," she said.

Of course, there are many kids who prepare plenty and still get anxious. For those kids, Collins recommends three ways to feel better on test days:

- 1. Get a good night's sleep the night before.**
- 2. Eat a good breakfast.**
- 3. Take a deep breath before starting the test and repeat a positive mantra (such as "I know this" or "I'm prepared for this").**

These tips should help your child, but for the kids who are super anxious – those who are thinking about worst-case scenarios like failing the test and failing the sixth grade, for example – the best way parents can help is by helping them think rationally.

"Anxiety makes us think irrationally," Collins said. "Help your child recognize that one bad test grade isn't the end of the world."

And if your child does fail?

"Tell him or her that not everyone is going to be perfect every time," Collins said. "Then help your child come up with some coping mechanisms that will help next time."

# What to do about bullying



*By Colleen Weinkam*

We've all seen the headlines. It seems as if bullying in America's schools has become an epidemic in recent years and is only getting worse.

According to the [National Center for Education Statistics](#), one out of every four students reports being bullied during the school year. [The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) has found that students who experience bullying are at increased risk for depression, anxiety, sleep difficulties and poor school adjustment, and that students who bully others are at an increased risk for substance abuse, academic problems and violence later in adolescence and adulthood.

But what is bullying? Licensed psychologist Suzanne Collins, who works with children and families at [Little Psychological Services](#) in Florence, wants you to learn the definition before you jump to the conclusion that your child is being bullied – or doing the bullying.

"Over the past couple of years, I've noticed that the word 'bullying' is becoming very commonly used," she said. "Kids are starting to identify as victims more frequently than I'd like to see."

Merriam-Webster defines a bully as "a blustering browbeating person, especially one habitually cruel to others who are weaker."

Collins wants to make sure parents remember the "habitual" part.

"To me, the biggest difference is if it's a repeated action, or if there is any kind of physical aggression," she said. "Those are immediate indicators of bullying. If a kid turns around to your kid in class, though, and says, 'That was a stupid question,' that's not necessarily bullying. A lot of times, I'm having to help parents and kids figure out if it really is a problematic situation or if it's actually a case of the kid who is identifying as a victim needing stronger coping skills."

Once you have all of the information and have determined that your child is a victim of bullying, Collins said, there are two important things you should tell your child to do:

- **Tell the child doing the bullying to stop.**
- **Walk away.**

"Oftentimes, kids who are bullied resort to bullying themselves, which only escalates the situation," Collins said, "and kids who tell on the bully can be bullied even more. Using your voice, walking away and then reassessing is a great first place to start. I don't want to see kids not speaking out, but I really want to see kids speaking up for themselves."

If you've determined your child is the one doing the bullying – again, only after getting all of the information – start by offering your child support and validating his or her feelings, Collins said.

"If your child is getting frustrated, try to figure out why he or she is acting out and teach him or her to manage that frustration another way," she said. "That does not mean that you agree with the behavior. You have to require your child to take responsibility for the behavior, but if you start out by accusing your child, he or she is just going to go on the defensive."

The bottom line? Get to the heart of the situation – whether your child is the one being bullied or the one doing the bullying – and talk to your child about what might be prompting the behavior. Then, teach your child steps to address it.

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# The Teen Brain: A Primer for Parents

*By Shelly Reese*



Hare-brained stunts, ill-considered decisions and a loose appreciation for the line between cause and effect. If that sounds like a fair description for your teen these days, congratulations, Junior is perfectly normal.

You may sometimes feel that your teen's impulsive, irrational and potentially dangerous behavior and approach to decision-making are intentional efforts to drive you crazy. Or you may think your teen is the only kid out there who fails to consider the possible consequences before leaping into action. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, you can blame biology.

Although your teenager may loom over you, his brain is still developing. Research shows the brain doesn't finish developing until an individual is in his early 20s.

Along the way, different parts of the brain develop at a different pace, according to the [American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry](#). While the amygdala, which is responsible for instinctual reactions including fear and aggressive behavior, develops early, the frontal cortex, which controls reasoning, develops later. The brain is also forming a lot of connections between brain cells and pruning neural pathways during adolescence.

In other words, the teen brain is in overdrive, but its approach to problem-solving and decision-making can be very different from an adult's.

"This unbalance in a teen's brain can affect their judgement and let them react more instinctively than an adult would. They are more likely to act without thinking about the consequences," says [Dr. Meghan Markovich](#), a St. Elizabeth Physicians pediatrician at the [Hebron Medical Arts Primary Care location](#).

That's not to say that teens can't make good decisions, but they may need a little more coaching, patience and guidance, Markovich says.

"As a parent, setting clear boundaries for your teen will be helpful," said Markovich. "Talking about potential situations ahead of time - for instance, what would you do if you found out your ride home had been drinking? - may [help the teen prepare](#) so when they need to make a decision quickly, they do not rely solely on their instincts and react impulsively."

