

Back To School With ADHD

Dr. Kenny Handelman

Summer time is often a welcome break for kids and teens with ADHD – and for their families. After a full school year of hard work and challenges, it's time for a well-earned break. And after a short number of weeks – it's time to get ready for school again...

When you plan for and use some simple strategies – you can increase your chances of success with this school year for your child or teen. Here are 8 tips to help you to get off on the right foot for this school year:

1. Start The School Routine Early: Changing the routine to suit getting to school can be a real challenge for children with ADHD. Start with the school bedtime and awakening times 2 weeks before school starts, so that your child has time to get used to being up early and being mentally alert for school. This is particularly challenging for teenagers who start to have 'day-night reversal' during the summer. Some teens may have to stay up all night/day so that they can go to bed at a reasonable hour and be tired enough to actually sleep (i.e. if they sleep until 3 pm, it's hard to be tired and fall asleep at 10 pm). This will start off the process of getting them back onto a reasonable sleep schedule.
2. Set Clear Expectations: Create a list of expectations for the different parts of your child's day. Put extra planning into the areas of concern from last year - whether that is getting ready in the morning, getting homework done at the end of the day, or other chores or responsibilities. This list will look different for teens – though it is likely even more important. When you have clear expectations for your child or teen, you are giving them a target to aim for. This can be very helpful to them, and to your family as a whole.
3. Get Clear on Schedules: Make a daily schedule for your child that includes recess, lunchtime and any after-school activities. Post it on the fridge where your child can see it the night before and send it to school with them so they know what is expected from them that day. We want ADHD kids and teens to get accustomed to their new schedule as quickly as possible, and this strategy can help.
4. Get The Right Start With Homework: Homework can be especially hard for children with ADHD. They may forget to write it down or leave a book at school. It is best to keep a homework log with the teacher and frequently remind your child to bring it and any necessary books home after school. You can

also ask the teacher to make sure that your child brings it home each day, and you make sure she/he takes it to school. Create a ‘homework routine’ – designate a certain period of time every day for your child to complete homework. Be sure to reward them when an assignment is completed. This can be more of a challenge with teens, though getting a good routine for homework is even more important for teens.

5. Advocate For Your Child: Remember that you are your child’s advocate at school. Make an effort to speak to the teacher about your child’s learning and behavioral needs early in the school year. Ensure that the resources which can help your child are put into place, and that everyone who needs to provide input is on board. Get help from the allies who are there to help you – whether it is a guidance counsellor, vice-principal, or even a previous teacher who was helpful in the past.

6. Daily Behavioral Report Card: Consider a daily behavioral report card. This can be a useful tool to help parents and teachers communicate. It can also lead to the opportunity to provide frequent, small rewards to encourage your child to keep on track at school.

7. Focus on Strengths: Remain positive with your child, and help them to build on their strengths. Remember that transitioning from summer holidays to school can be especially challenging for children with ADHD. Celebrate all successes, no matter how small - anything from a good mark, to a good report from the teacher, to making a new friend.

8. Get Medical Support: Keep track of how your child or teen is doing in the transition back to school. Be sure to review this with your child’s doctor 2-6 weeks after the school year starts. Also be sure to take copies of report cards to the doctor’s office, so your doctor is aware of how your child is doing at school.

The above tips can help you to support your child or teen to start the school year off right. When we talk about treating ADHD, we need to remember that we need multi-modal treatment. This means treatment that focuses on all modalities, including parenting strategies, school strategies, medication treatments, alternative treatments, and treatment integration (including working on co-existing conditions). Be sure to implement these back to school strategies within the context of a complete, multi-modal treatment program.

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Dr. Kenny is a Child and Adult Psychiatrist who specializes in ADHD in Oakville, Ontario. He is the author of: *Attention Difference Disorder: How To Turn Your ADHD Child or Teen's Differences Into Strengths in 7 Simple Steps*. You can find more practical and supportive advice for parents of kids and teens with ADHD in his book (available in bookstores and online).