

Coaching Your Child As School Begins

By Sue Smarkala, Professional and Life Coach, Adlerian Counselling and Consulting Group Inc.

Not all coaches carry a clipboard and have a whistle around their necks! Milk and cookies are likely the preferred tools of a parent coach. Coaching from the sidelines is an important role for parents as children face new beginnings. Returning to school is a major adjustment for all children each September. Parents are central in the preparation for this transition at all grade levels. How can you as a parent help your child negotiate the new school year in a way that fosters independence, confidence and self-discipline?

September – A Time of Change

The first few weeks of children finding their way around their schools can be exciting and exhausting for them. There is the fun of reconnecting with classmates not seen over the summer as well as the challenge of new courses. Big changes for the child can include: a new school, new teachers, changes from last year's school transportation, new friends, a new caregiver and/or adjusting to the demands of returning to a routine and a schedule. Coaching your child through these challenges can ensure s/he settles into the school routine smoothly and comfortably. Through your coaching, your child will develop the necessary skills to handle school situations, and will learn to apply those new skills in other areas of life.

Your Role as Parent and Coach

Your role as a parent is to encourage your child to become a responsible, independent student who wants to learn and can manage his/her life at school. When your child needs help to achieve those goals, you are there to coach them. Attitude is everything, yours and theirs! Your attitude and opinion of school can colour the way your child sees school. As a coach, you need to model your trust and optimism that your child is absolutely capable of handling school. By watching you, your child learns to believe in and trust his/her abilities. The coaching support you provide is driven by the needs of the child – and who better than you, the parent, to gauge the amount of support necessary.

Consider a proactive approach to helping your child acclimatize to the school year as smoothly as possible. Knowing your child's capabilities, interests and fears, allows you to fit your coaching to those areas of school activities that will most challenge him/her. What skills are needed by your child to be successful in meeting this new school year? What skills are already in place? What skill levels are reasonable for your child to acquire at this stage? What complementary support will you need to provide for your child's successful re-entry into school? Always remember, the more your child does, the more capable and confident he/she becomes. Your child will grow to meet challenges in life, because of confidence built up by taking small, manageable steps on his/her own.

Discuss the new school year with your child. Talk about the upcoming days in a positive, encouraging manner to involve him/her in the planning. Ask lots of questions to understand their concerns and/or fears about the new experiences. Listen for the exciting parts of the new school

year – the interesting, fun activities. Ask them for ideas for preparation. What experiences can you give your children that will help them develop the skills they will need?

- Ordering their own food at a restaurant, and paying for it themselves, parallels the new experience of eating in a school cafeteria.
- Going for a ride on a city bus prepares them for traveling to school by bus.
- Riding together to the school on bikes, and locking the bike to the rack, prepares them for the first time they ride to school on a bike.
- Reviewing rules of the road as you walk to the park reinforces the lessons for handling traffic as they walk to school.
- Walking to the new caregiver's home, from school, or the school bus drop-off spot, builds their confidence in taking that same walk on their own on the first day of school.
- Discussing and planning a routine with your child that fits everything into the family schedule, helps the whole family understand the shift of activities from summer to school time, and allows the development of time management skills and making a choice among competing options.
- Discussing the course choices and co-creating a selection of subjects that best meets interests and future needs, builds an understanding of making important choices in life.

You are likely aware of many of these new beginnings, and are already coaching your child for success. It is in your discussions with your child, understanding their questions and concerns, that you may hear additional areas where they require help. You also lay the foundation for problem solving during those conversations. When the assumptions do not quite match the actual situation or the plan is not quite right, it is then that the connection you developed starts to pay off. Collaborate with your child to amend plans to better deal with new situations. Evaluating the plan, being flexible to review and change it, are all great life skills for children to learn.

Celebrate your child's accomplishments as he/she handles the new and different aspects of the school year. Talk about and name your child's accomplishments so that he/she can also appreciate the new skills he/she is mastering. Engage the family in supporting each child returning to school. A child's job is to attend school. By making it a positive and healthy experience you lay the groundwork for responsible, confident and productive adults. When they apply the back-to-school skills in other areas of their lives, the value of your coaching is clear. Your son or daughter has learned to take their place in his or her community of friends, family and colleagues. And, coach, celebrate your partnership in those successes! Milk and cookies anyone?