7 Back to School Strategies to Promote Less Stress & More Flow

It’s 1976. I’m in fifth grade and standing by our front door with my red plaid backpack. My eyes scanning, I watch my four younger brothers dart from room to room. My stomach is in knots. It’s 7:45 a.m. We should have left fifteen minutes ago. Lunches are half-made, my brothers are shooting slingshots and my mom — never a morning person — is admonishing my dad, our morning chauffeur, about forgetting to pay a bill. Our orange VW van pulls up late to the Montessori school and my siblings and I tumble out, rattled. We scatter to our classrooms. I look back for a minute and see my dad hunched over the wheel eating Grape-Nuts out of a measuring cup before starting the car again. His jaw is clenched; his brow is knit with stress. God bless him.

Growing up I remember my family’s morning routine being a three-ring circus (perhaps this is unavoidable when you grow up in a big family – I’m the oldest of seven!).

After I became a parent, I really wanted to do it differently. Today, as a life balance coach and knowing that the morning start can set the tone for the entire day, I like to begin every new school year by asking, “What things can we do to support our family in experiencing less stress and more flow in the coming school year?” Transitions can be stressful and family life is messy, but just taking a bit of time to reflect on your intention for this fresh start can make a big difference.

Here are seven things my family has found to be helpful in setting the course for a more flowing fall:

1. **Pause:** Ask your family what worked and what didn’t last school year? My husband and I have been discussing the root causes for some of the stress we experienced with our teenage son last spring. We identified three things that we’re addressing with him so we don’t repeat these patterns and we’re soliciting his ideas, too. Ahhhh, I feel better already!

2. **Create a vision:** What’s your intention for the fall? How do you want to experience school mornings and evenings? What words come to mind? Does anyone in your family have special needs this fall (a career transition, health challenge or learning disability) that require extra attention? Some families even like to come up with a mantra or theme for the year.

3. **Don’t overschedule yourself or your kids.** When we do less, we experience more joy, freedom and connection with our loved ones (read more). Learning to say no is one of the most helpful skills you can master.

4. **Create structure so you can flow.** I know many of us love and value spontaneity (me too), but a little planning can help create a greater sense of ease when everyone knows what to expect. Maybe Monday is Funday (i.e., dessert night or Scrabble after dinner), Sunday nights are for planning out the week’s driving/activity schedule, or a bulletin board in your kitchen posts the month’s calendar and includes everyone’s upcoming activities. Plan ahead so you can create pockets of unscheduled time.

5. **Get the support you need.** Anticipate and plan for what type of personal, family and professional support you and your kids may need this fall (parenting coach, meal prep, carpooling, a career mentor). Reach out and ask for help – support makes all the difference in how you experience the journey (read more).
6. **Make self-nourishment a priority.** Physical/mental/emotional/spiritual renewal are essential to your happiness and well-being. What most nourishes your family (camping trips, family game nights, weekend getaways, unscheduled Sundays, nature walks in your favorite woods)? Schedule these respites now and make them a priority.

7. **Communicate the plan.** Whether you have a toddler or a teen, kids like to know that “we’re all in this together” and their voice matters. Take time to solicit their input (What DO you want for breakfast?), ask them to help engage in problem solving (What are your ideas to promote a better sleep routine?) and then write down some of your collective decisions/guidelines so you’re all on the same page. This can create feelings of camaraderie and cohesiveness.

Even if you just adopted one of these strategies, it could make a huge difference in how you experience the launch of the school year. Change can be challenging for many personality types. Be easy on yourself and remember, *people first, things second*. Sometimes we’re hardest on those that we love the most.

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